The New Criterion

April 1993

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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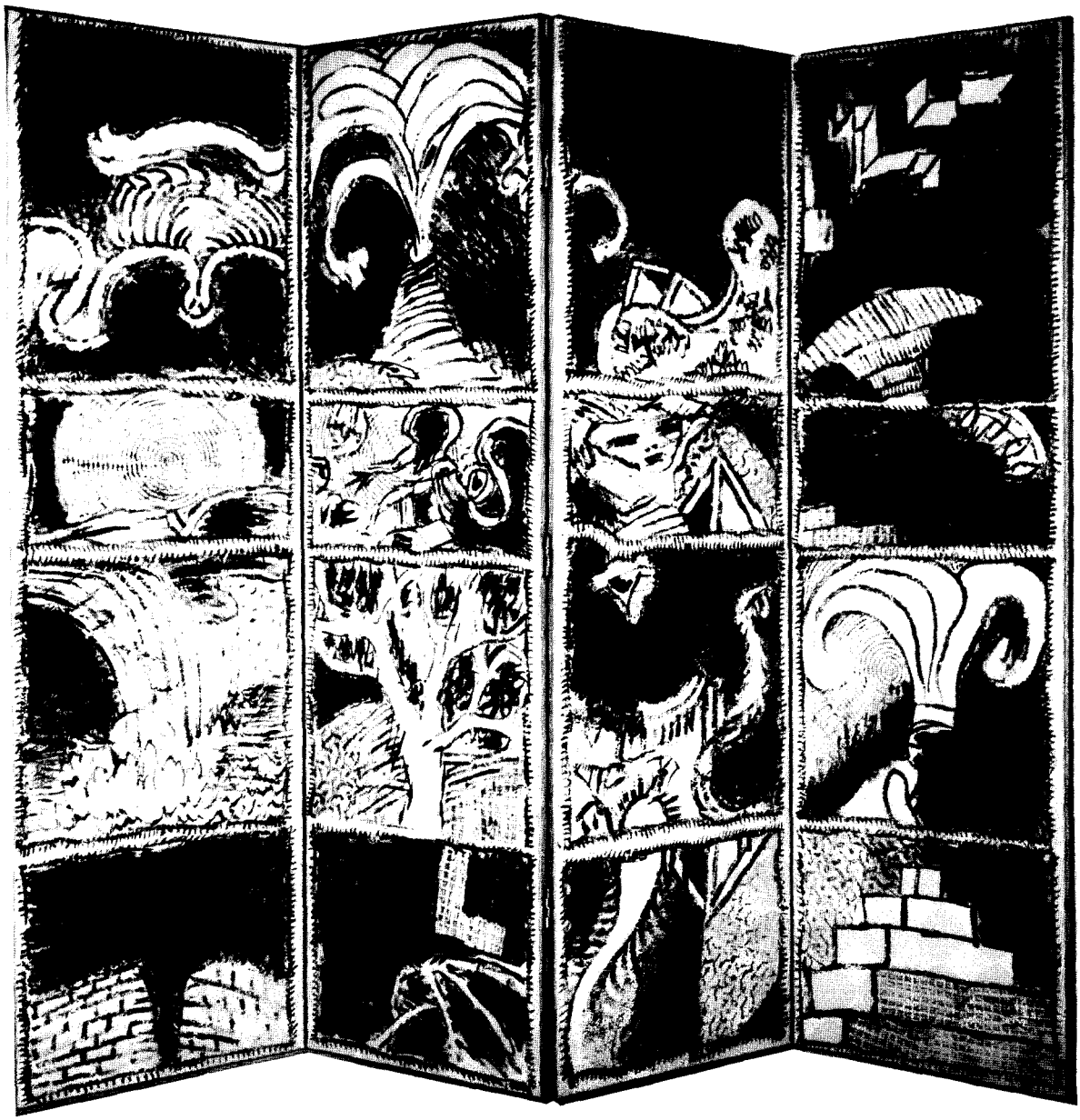

PIERRE ALECHINSKY

An exhibition entitled *Trees and Water and Other Works* will be on display from March 25 to April 24 at the ANDRÉ EMMERICH GALLERY, 41 East 57th Street, New York 10022. Tel: (212) 752-0124, fax: (212) 371-7345. A catalogue with eight color plates and an essay by the artist is available at $15. Shown above is *Vocabulaire (I)*, 1986, a four-panel screen measuring 9 feet 2 inches in height by 10 feet 6 inches fully extended (280 x 320 centimeters).

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The New Criterion *April 1993*

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Bruce Bawer's new collection of essays, *The Aspect of Eternity*, will be published next month by Graywolf Press.

J. Duncan Berry's translation of Sigfried Giedion's *Bauen in Frankreich* will be published this year by the Getty Center.

James Bowman is the American editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement*.

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Mark Jarman is the author of *The Black Riviera* (Wesleyan) and, more recently, of a book-length poem entitled *Iris* (Story Line Press).

X. J. Kennedy's latest book of poems is *Dark Horses* (Johns Hopkins).

Roger Kimball's book, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*, is now out in paper from HarperPerennial.

Tess Lewis is a free-lance translator and book critic living in Manhattan. She wrote about Norman Manea for our October issue.

Samuel Lipman's latest book, *Music & More: Essays 1975-1991*, was published last year by Northwestern University Press.

Jed Perl is the author, most recently, of *Gallery Going: Four Seasons in the Art World* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).

Jenny Teichman is a Fellow of New Hall College, Cambridge. "The False Philosophy of Peter Singer" first appeared, in briefer form, in *Quadrant*, the Australian monthly of books and ideas.

Karen Wilkin is the author, with Lewis C. Kachur, of *The Drawings of Stuart Davis*, just out from Harry N. Abrams.

Cynthia Zarin's second book of poems, *Fire Lyric*, will be published in August by Alfred A. Knopf.

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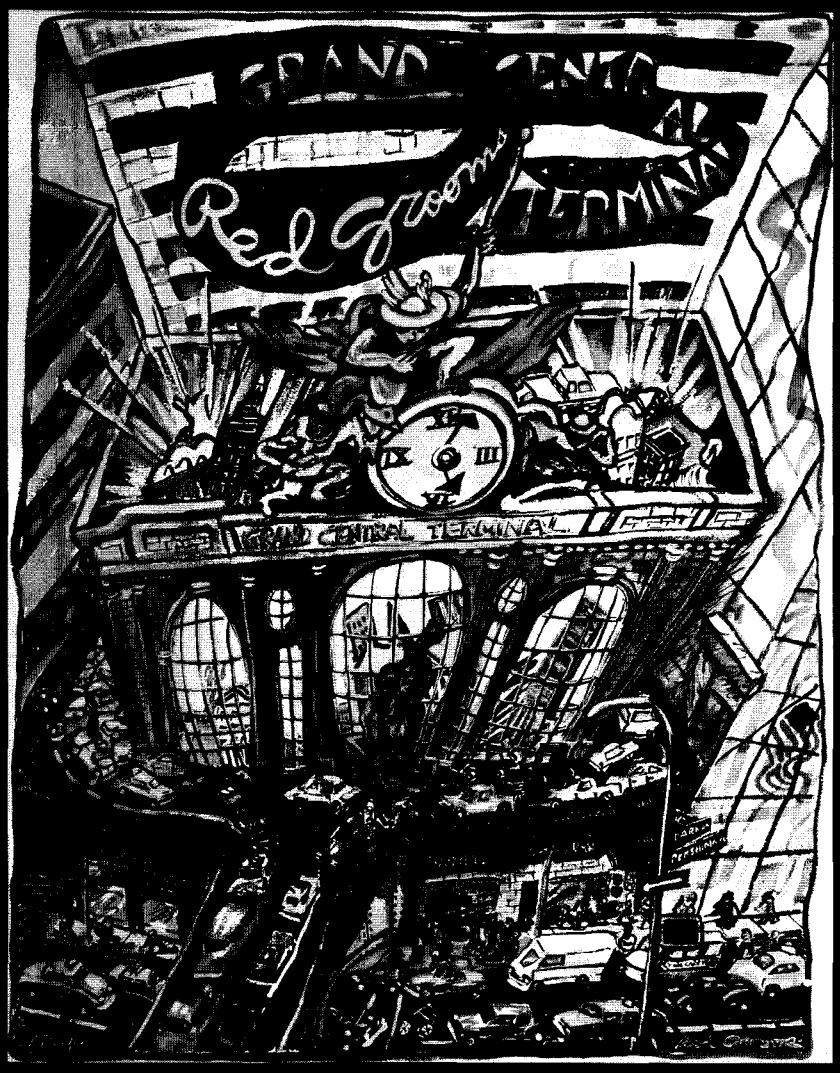

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Notes & Comments: April 1993

The Sixties revolution & its legacy

Much has been written in these pages about the political upheavals of the 1960s and the radical changes they have brought to every aspect of our cultural and intellectual life. What has now come to be called the "culture war" has indeed been a central concern of *The New Criterion* since its founding in 1982. It wasn't yet called a "war" in those days, for its effects were believed by enlightened mainstream opinion to be confined to the universities, the arts institutions, and certain branches of the media, where changes in intellectual fashion were thought to be both inevitable and desirable, and of no great consequence—certainly of no malign consequence—as far as the life of the larger society was concerned. Anyone who suggested, as we often did, that what amounted to a sweeping cultural and moral revolution was upon us in these developments was likely to be dismissed as benighted or extremist. Elite opinion smiled upon these changes as a welcome liberalization of our society and turned a deaf ear to the few critics who were sounding an alarm about the catastrophe that was rapidly overtaking every aspect of life and thought.

Whatever else might be said about this wholesale denial of history—*our* history—the time has clearly passed when that denial can be effectively sustained. The culture war has now openly been acknowledged on all sides. And while the critics of the cultural revolution remain an embattled minority, they are no longer alone in recognizing its destructive consequences. Every parent with a child in school, every reader of the newspapers, and every viewer of television is witness to the lethal implications of this revolution. If the battle is not yet fully joined, there is now at least a much wider recognition in our society that fundamental issues are at stake in the cultural revolution that began in the Sixties and has lately been codified as policy and pedagogy.

It is in this context that we call our readers' attention to a new book that addresses these issues with a cogency and passion unequaled by anything else yet written on the subject. It is rare for a single short book to cast such a penetrating light on the world in which we live that it instantly becomes an indispensable guide to the outstanding questions of the day. Yet the slender volume called *The Dream and the Nightmare* (Morrow; $20) is a work of this extraordinary kind. Written by Myron Magnet, a member of the board of editors at *Fortune* magazine and a senior fellow of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, the book is at once an analysis of the cultural revolution that has transformed American life in recent decades and a comprehensive account of the devastating consequences that have followed in its wake. *The Dream and the Nightmare* is also a concise

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history of the good intentions and bad ideas that have reshaped our society in this period. About everything from the moral degradation of the underclass to the intellectual disgrace of our school and college classrooms to the spiritual disarray of our middle class, Mr. Magnet has something important to say. He is indeed a master at tracing the intellectual provenance of the troubles that now beset our society and our culture from top to bottom.

It is in fact upon the relation that obtains between the top—or what are here called "the Haves"—and the bottom—"the Have-Nots"—that Mr. Magnet has constructed his account of what he calls in the subtitle of his book "The Sixties' Legacy to the Underclass." "This book's central argument," he writes, "is that the Haves are implicated [in the catastrophic fate of the underclass] because over the last thirty years they radically remade American culture, turning it inside out and upside down to accomplish a cultural revolution whose most mangled victims turned out to be the Have-Nots."

As Mr. Magnet duly acknowledges, "this was the precise opposite of what was supposed to happen," and everyone who was witness to the beginning of the cultural revolution in the 1960s will recognize the accuracy of his description. He speaks of the "two related liberations" that the Haves initiated for the benefit of the poor—the Have-Nots—and for themselves. The first of these was "the political and economic liberation of the Have-Nots—the poor and the black" that had been "impelled by the fervor of the civil rights movement." The ideal that guided the Haves, he writes,

> was a vision of democracy; their honorable aim was to complete democracy's work, to realize democratic values fully by making American society more open and inclusive. Out of this democratic impulse sprang the War on Poverty, welfare benefit increases, court-ordered school busing, more public housing projects, affirmative action, job-training programs, drug treatment programs, special education, *The Other America*, Archie Bunker, *Roots*, countless editorials and magazine articles and TV specials, black studies programs, multicultural curricula, new textbooks, all-black college dorms, sensitivity courses, minority set-asides, Martin Luther King Day, and the political correctness movement at colleges, to name only some of the almost endless manifestations.

This effort to "liberate the poor and excluded from their marginality," Mr. Magnet writes, was accompanied by "a second, even more spectacular liberation" that the Haves sought for themselves—and this liberation, too, had a devastating effect in reshaping the life of the Have-Nots. In the most general and far-reaching terms, this movement was governed by the desire of the Haves to free themselves from the claims of conformity and convention in their personal behavior, and the result was a historical change in the moral life of the American people.

"That longing found two epochal expressions," Mr. Magnet writes.

> The first was the sexual revolution, whose attitudes, diffused throughout the culture by advertising, movies, popular music, and television, so transformed values and behavior that they ultimately reshaped family life, increasing divorce, illegitimacy, and female-headed families on all levels of society.

The second manifestation of this longing by the Haves for personal liberation was, of course, the Sixties counterculture.

> As its name announced, the counterculture rejected traditional bourgeois culture as sick, repressive, and destructive. Bourgeois culture's sexual mores, based on guilt, marriage, and the perverse belief that present gratification should be deferred to achieve future goals, were symptoms of its pathology. Its sobriety and decorum were mere slavish, hypocritical conformism; its industriousness betokened an upside-down, materialistic value system; its family life was yet another arena of coercion and guilt.

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It was from all these horrors, as well as from the oppressive character of capitalism itself, that the counterculture was supposed to liberate us all.

The immediate effect of this moral revolution was made manifest in every area of American life. "The new adversary stance toward conventional beliefs and ideals, breathlessly reported in the press and diffused almost instantly among the young," Mr. Magnet writes, "quickly put traditional values on the defensive, making them newly problematic even for those who continued to hold them." What he describes as the "yoking together of personal and political liberations" became, in effect, an established convention, producing a cultural revolution that, as he writes, "failed in devastating ways in both of its two large intentions."

> Instead of ending poverty for the Have-Nots . . . the new cultural order fostered, in the underclass and the homeless, a new, intractable poverty that shocked and dismayed . . . that went beyond the economic realm into the realm of pathology.

Behind this pathology, as Mr. Magnet points out, was a fundamental moral shift: behavior that had hitherto been widely disparaged was now countenced and even celebrated. "[D]uring the sixties and seventies," he writes, "the new culture of the Haves, in its quest for personal liberation, withdrew respect from the behavior and attitudes that have traditionally boosted people up the economic ladder—deferral of gratification, sobriety, thrift, dogged industry, and so on through the whole catalogue of antique-sounding bourgeois virtues."

It was not only the Have-Nots who were the casualties of this cultural revolution. Mr. Magnet also demonstrates the many ways in which the Haves themselves were victims of the cultural revolution they had brought about—a revolution that, paradoxically, inflicted great damage upon the very democratic values it was meant to serve. "In order to gain laudable ethical ends," Mr. Magnet observes,

> the Haves acquiesced in dubious and ultimately destructive measures such as the parceling out of rewards on the basis of race . . . or the excusing of criminals as themselves victims . . . [or] the lifetime public support of able-bodied women whose only career was the production of illegitimate and mostly ill-parented children.

Central to Mr. Magnet's analysis of this catastrophic period of our history is his reminder of where this revolution originated: among the liberal elite. The cultural revolution, he writes,

> was made by an elite of opinion makers, policymakers, and mythmakers—lawyers, judges, professors, political staffers, journalists, writers, TV and movie honchos, clergymen—and it was overwhelmingly a liberal, left-of-center elite. Thus for the last thirty years, the dominant American culture has been liberal culture; notwithstanding Republican presidents in the White House, the ideas and values that have come to Americans from their newspapers and network news programs, their university (and increasingly their grammar and high school) classrooms, their pulpits, their novels and movies and television sitcoms, their magazines and advertisements and popular music, their courtrooms and their Congress, have added up to a liberal, left-of-center worldview.

The Dream and the Nightmare comes to us at a crucial moment in our history. For we live today amid the wreckage of the Sixties, and the ideas and policies that have bequeathed us this wreckage are still very much with us—are still, indeed, in control of our liberal culture and our liberal institutions. Now that the dream is in ruins and the nightmare can no longer be denied, perhaps the real work of reversing the cultural revolution can at last begin in earnest. *The Dream and the Nightmare* marks an important step in that direction.

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Henry James & the life of art

by Hilton Kramer

The whole of the man was in the special work—he was all *a writer, a critic, an appreciator. He was literary in every pulsation of his being, and he expressed himself totally in his literary life. No character and no career were ever more homogeneous. He had no disturbing, perverting tastes; he suffered no retarding, embarrassing accidents. He lost no time, and he never wasted any. He was not even married; his literary consciousness was never complicated with the sense of an unliterary condition. His mind was never diverted or distracted from its natural exercise —that of looking in literature for illustrations of life, and of looking in life for aids to literature. Therefore it is, as I say, that his work offers a singularly complete image of his character, his tastes, his temper, his idiosyncrasies. It was from himself always that he spoke—from his own personal and intimate point of view.*

—Henry James on Sainte-Beuve, 1880

This month marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Henry James, who was born on April 15, 1843, in New York City. James is today so firmly established as a literary master that it may hardly seem necessary to reaffirm the greatness of his achievement on this anniversary occasion. His work, after all, has met the most crucial test. His major writings—and many minor ones, too—remain in print, some of them in many editions, and they continue to be read and to be written about, even in some cases to be argued about. In the bookshops the long row of titles in neat Penguin paperbacks, together with the accumulating volumes in the handsome Library of America series, are palpable witness to the durability of his art. This is a happy fate for a writer who, in the last years of his long literary labors, when his market had dwindled and a new generation of writers had taken to ridiculing his style, had ample reason to wonder if his work would enjoy any posterity at all. Even in the universities, where his own clearly articulated view of literature has now fallen into disfavor, he is still considered enough of a prize to be made the object of ideological appropriation. Thus, even James's enemies pay him the homage of wishing to distort his achievement. That, too, is immortality of a kind.

What may be worth recalling on this occasion, since ours is an amnesiac culture and the exertions of an earlier generation of writers can no longer be counted upon to be present in the minds of their living beneficiaries, is that the high reputation now enjoyed by James's *oeuvre* represents one of the most remarkable feats of literary exhumation in the history of twentieth-century literature. Hard now as it may be for us to understand a loss of such magnitude, it is a fact that in the decade following James's death in 1916 his reputation was all but extinct as far as the American literary public was concerned. Abroad he won great and intelligent praise from certain expatriate writers—most notably, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound—but on this side of the Atlantic James's own expatriation

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was the source of a fierce resentment, and it was made all the more distasteful to American opinion by James's decision in the last year of his life, when the United States had not yet entered the First World War and England was suffering immense losses, to become a British subject. This act of solidarity with the people among whom he had lived and worked for many decades cost James's posthumous reputation a great deal. He was, in effect, written out of the history of American literature, and there he remained, unread and out-of-print, for some years to come. What meager attention his books received was not much of an improvement on the surrounding silence. There was, for example, Van Wyck Brooks's *The Pilgrimage of Henry James* (1925), which traced James's "failure" to his long residence abroad and described his later novels as "Magnificent pretensions, petty performances!—the fruits of an irresponsible imagination, of a deranged sense of values, of a mind working in a void, uncorrected by any clear consciousness of human cause and effect." Five years earlier, H. L. Mencken had dismissed James in a similar spirit as "a sort of super-Howells, with a long row of laborious but essentially hollow books behind him."

It wasn't until the 1930s that James's work began to be disinterred from the obscurity to which American literary opinion had consigned it in the decade following the war. It is interesting to note that it was in 1931 that Leon Edel, who has done more to make James available to and understood by the present generation than any other single writer, published his study of *Henry James: Les Années dramatiques* in Paris. The Thirties in America seems an unlikely setting for a revival of Henry James, but that is only because we have never had a proper history of American literature in the Thirties. The history of the Thirties has largely remained the property of the literary Left in this country, and you won't read much about the James revival in their accounts of what was important in that decade. There are some honorable exceptions, of course—most notably, Edmund Wilson—but the hard-line Left could never find much to admire in James when it was laying down the law for the production of proletarian literature and negotiating the ideological nuances of the Popular Front.

But there was a lot more to American literature in the Thirties than was dreamed of in the philosophy of the Popular Front. This was also the decade in which, among much else, Wallace Stevens and William Faulkner published some of their best work—which was not especially beloved by the comrades, either—and the New Criticism emerged as a serious challenge to established literary opinion. One of the journals of the period in which the New Criticism could be read was Lincoln Kirstein's *Hound & Horn*, which in the spring of 1934 devoted an entire issue to James. This was the salvo that launched the Henry James revival. Among the contributors to this issue were Marianne Moore, Edmund Wilson, Stephen Spender, R. P. Blackmur, John Wheelwright, and Glenway Wescott. Together with other writers nowadays less familiar to us, they set an entirely new standard for the discussion of James's work, and thereby put in motion the critical revaluation that placed James in the preeminent position he enjoys today.

In the Forties this labor of revaluation accelerated as a host of literary quarterlies and "little" magazines took up James's cause. In some of the college textbooks of the period, James was still an object of categorical disparagement—Philip Rahv, in an essay called "Attitudes Toward Henry James" (1943), cited a line from *The College Book of American Literature* that read: "It is not certain that Henry James really belongs to American literature, for he was critical of America and admired Europe"—but in the highbrow literary world James was now the subject of a feverish rediscovery, and some of his books began to be reprinted. By the end of the Fifties, a quarter-century after that special issue of *Hound & Horn*, the task of rehabilitation was on its way to completion. James was once again in the bookstores, and he was now being assigned to college students. He was also beginning to influence more and

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more of the fiction and criticism of the period. He could once again be referred to —as he was in his own circle in his lifetime— as a *master* without any suggestion of irony. In some quarters, indeed, he was on his way to becoming a cult.

What, it may be asked, precipitated this remarkable revival of interest in a writer who seemed, in the immediate aftermath of his death, doomed to oblivion, yet who is without doubt the greatest writer of his American generation? The full answer to this question is likely to be as complicated as one of James's great novels, but the heart of the matter, it seems to me, lies in our attitude toward literature as an art—an art capable of transcending the two-dimensional issues of the day in order to encompass the permanent lineaments of our fate. It was in the name of art at this lofty level of vision that the James revival was initiated by writers who, upon rediscovering this native master for themselves, felt an acute sense of loss at his rejection by philistine opinion. Clearly, their own literary aspirations were felt to be implicated in the rehabilitation of a writer who, in the reach of his aesthetic ambition and his remarkable consistency in realizing it, might serve as a model of future achievement. American literature did not have so many talents of the first order that it could afford to squander one of the greatest for reasons that, upon close examination, always turned out to be parochial, ill-informed, and aesthetically fatuous. It was thus not only in the interest of doing justice to the past that the James revival was undertaken with such a keen sense of purpose, but in the interest of the future as well.

That James had so single-mindedly devoted himself to the life of art had always been a cause of uneasiness, if not outright contempt, in the critics who were concerned to erect some artificial standard for literature in the name of "life" and then indict him for failing to meet it. Van Wyck Brooks was by no means the worst of these critics, but he was certainly one of the most gifted, and in rereading the James issue of *Hound & Horn* you can still feel the presence of *The Pilgrimage of Henry James* as an incitement to anger and rebuttal nearly a decade after its publication. "Apparently Mr. Brooks likes his red meat plain," wrote Lawrence Leighton in one of the most beautiful of the essays, and then pointed out what must now be plain to every reader of James's fiction: "actually James is dealing, as he always dealt, with the same old subject: treachery, cruelty, tyranny, and hypocrisy." He also saw that Brooks, like so many others at the time, was "unable to see any dignity in James's struggle to be the perfect artist."

Nowadays, of course, this indictment of James's art in the name of "life" comes in a quite different form. Whereas Mencken, for example, thought that what James most needed to succeed as a literary artist was a protracted immersion in the "stupendous abattoirs" of Chicago, James's latest biographer—Fred Kaplan—shifts the problem to the bedroom, or at least its closet. From its opening pages—in fact, its second paragraph—*Henry James: The Imagination of Genius* gives us a portrait of the artist as a repressed Gustav von Aschenbach, who, "afraid of his own sensual nature," could not accept his homosexuality, and therefore turned a good many of his novels into allegories of his own sexual fantasies.[1]

Thus, in the second paragraph of Mr. Kaplan's book, we encounter Henry James at the age of twenty-nine in Venice:

> Half a dozen young boys played in the delicious silence. They seemed "the handsomest little brats in the world, and each was furnished with a pair of eyes that could only have signified the protest of nature against the meanness of fortune. They were very nearly as naked as savages." One small boy seemed "the most expressively beautiful creature I had ever looked upon. He had a smile to make Correggio sigh in his grave. . . . Verily nature is still at odds with propriety. . . . I shall always remember with infinite tender conjecture, as the years

1 *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius. A Biography*, by Fred Kaplan; Morrow, 620 pages, $25.

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> roll by, this little unlettered Eros of the Adriatic strand."

To which Mr. Kaplan adds: "It was as if Eros had risen from the Adriatic waters in the immaculate form of a handsome Italian boy."

No mention is made, of course, that in the classical mythology that was no doubt more present in James's mind than it is in Mr. Kaplan's, Eros was always represented as a young boy "nearly as naked as savages." But this passage is merely the first sounding of the leitmotif that gives Mr. Kaplan's book its principal *raison d'être*, which, as James W. Tuttleton wrote in a review in *The Times Literary Supplement*, is to "out" James "as homosexual by nature" and then tell the sad story of his inability to act on his sexual nature. This leads, in the end, to Mr. Kaplan's remarkable interpretation of *The Portrait of a Lady* as an allegory of James's passion for his brother William. The "Lady," in other words, is none other than James himself, with William in the role of Gilbert Osmond. No wonder that Mr. Tuttleton was led to ask, "Are all of James's women characters now to be understood as merely Henry in drag?"

James's celibate life has often provoked his commentators to indulge in fantasy and speculation, and it was to be expected, I suppose, now that "gay studies" have achieved a respectable status in the university English departments and the annual meetings of the Modern Language Association, that someone would give James the "gay studies" treatment. We might even consider ourselves fortunate that the task fell to Mr. Kaplan, who is both a better scholar and a better writer than most of the converts to this school of interpretation. But he isn't much of a critic, and what his book really signifies is a return to the indictment of James as somehow having failed to deal with "life." The horror, of course, is that this is now the way James is being taught in a good many college courses—which, given the choice, is rather worse than his not being taught at all. In his wonderful poem "At the Grave of Henry James," W. H. Auden spoke of the "ruminant hatred of all that cannot/ Be simplified or stolen" and of the "lust/ To vilify the landscape of Distinction," and there was never any reason to suppose that our own period would be any different in this respect than those earlier periods when James was so badly treated. But the great difference now is that his work is all there and available to refute these facile assaults on his art, and it was to that end, after all, that he devoted his life to art. "Idealism which was willing to make sacrifices for its self-preservation," wrote Marianne Moore in the *Hound & Horn*, "is always an element in the conjuring-wand of Henry James." Which brings us a good deal closer to his spirit and his achievement on this anniversary than all the pages than are now devoted to some imaginary amatory allegories.

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The first half of Muriel Spark

by Roger Kimball

The poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable impossibilities.
—Aristotle, the *Poetics*

When I first started writing people used to say my novels were exaggerated. They never were exaggerated, merely aspects of realism.
—Muriel Spark, *Loitering with Intent*

In a review of the reissue of *London Labour and the London Poor* in 1968, W. H. Auden remarked that Henry Mayhew's sprawling portrait of Victorian London street life—brimming with such vivid specimens as Jack Black, Rat-Killer to Her Majesty—led him to revise his understanding of Dickens. Far from being a "fantastic creator of over-life-size characters," Auden concluded, Dickens was in fact "much more of a 'realist' than he is generally taken for."

One occasionally has a similar feeling when reading the fiction of the Scottish-born novelist Muriel Spark. What seems at first like caricature often turns out to pass, for the moment anyway, as unvarnished reportage. Generally, the reports are not encouraging. Perhaps, deep down, "the facts" themselves express a species of caricature; and perhaps, on reflection, one realizes this. Spark's trick is to coax us into musing that, if one were to go deeper still, maybe . . . The presentiment often terminates in an ellipsis, a feeling of uneasiness, anxiety. Not for nothing is the imperative "Memento Mori"—*Remember that you shall die*—the title of one of her best known and most accomplished books. In that sober tale, all the characters are aged and more than a few are senile. "Being over seventy," one of them observes, "is like being engaged in a war. All our friends are going or gone and we survive amongst the dead and dying as on a battlefield." By the end of the novel, the battlefield is wiped clear, and the reader is given a brief recap of the characters' particular fates: "Lettie Colston . . . comminuted fractures of the skull; Godfrey Colston, hypostatic pneumonia; Charmian Colston, uremia; Jean Taylor, myocardial degeneration; Tempest Sidebottome, carcinoma of the cervix;" etc., etc.

The grimly comic cultivation of such reminders is a Sparkian trademark. Doubtless, it has something to do with religion, specifically with Catholicism, the faith to which Spark converted in 1954. Our life on earth is a pilgrimage, a prolegomenon, and one mustn't forget it: This basic conviction figures prominently, though undogmatically, in all Spark's work, infusing it with the ambition of allegory. But the vertiginous effect of her fiction is not simply a coefficient of faith. It is also the product of a literary gift, a sensibility.

Many of the settings, events, and characters that populate Spark's fiction have antecedants, more or less distant, in her life: a charismatic school teacher, an ailing grandmother, a club for women in war-time London, a friend who was murdered by her husband who in turn killed himself. All appear

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transmuted—*transfigured*, to use a Sparkian adjective—in her novels and stories. Spark is a dab hand at presenting the wrong end of the telescope and then exclaiming, "See, I told you it was like that!" Her imaginings are frequently extravagant. It is business as usual in Sparkland to find a story narrated by a ghost ("He looked as if he would murder me and he did," a dead narrator explains), a plot turned by an angel. Yet it is a measure of Spark's artistry that—in those works where everything gels—ghosts and angels seem no more (but also no less) outrageous than rhododendrons. Somehow it is not a problem that the anonymous telephone calls to the characters in *Memento Mori* (1959) reminding them of their doom are without earthly source. Suspending or extending disbelief hardly comes into it: Spark's spare, immaculate prose—cool and fatally accurate—does the work, easing collusion if not, exactly, affirmation. There is a moral but no catechism.

In this respect, if in few others, her work recalls the Gothic realism of the American novelist and master of the short story Flannery O'Connor. For both writers, the operation of grace is generally a funny but decidedly astringent affair. The humor comes from regarding the doings of man *sub specie aeternitatis*, the ultimate prescription for farce. What we might call this cosmic dimension of Spark's comic vision led the novelist Malcolm Bradbury to speak, admiringly, of her "great gift for being appalling." The gift is appalling because it grants insight but tends to discount such homely virtues as warmth, human attachment, affection. Not everyone finds this attractive. The critic Christopher Ricks, for example, writing about Spark in 1968, commented that "Perhaps when man proposes, God disposes with as cool a disposition as Mrs. Spark's, though if He indeed looks upon His created world with the same eye with which she looks upon hers, then thank God I am an atheist." One imagines Spark savored that "thank God."

She was intensely literary from the dawn of reason, setting down poem after poem beginning in grade school. But Muriel Spark did not embark earnestly on fiction until the early 1950s. Since then, she has been unstoppable. Although she has lived for some years in Italy, dividing her time, we are told, between Rome and Tuscany, Spark has not relinquished a Scottish disposition to industry. ("What a wonderful thing it was to be a woman and an artist in the twentieth century," Fleur Talbot, the narrator of *Loitering with Intent* (1981), repeatedly exclaims: despite the irony—Fleur is a bit creepy—the declaration has the air of a credo.) To date, in addition to several early collaborations, Spark has to her credit nineteen novels, an abundance of verse (she continues, she says, to think of herself as "predominantly a poet"), a plump *Collected Stories*, a play, a children's book, biographies of Mary Shelley and John Masefield, and an edition of the Brontë letters. One of her best and most subtle books, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), was made into a successful play and then, with Maggie Smith in the title role, a successful movie. (Glenda Jackson was signed up for the movie version of *The Abbess of Crewe* [1974], a political potboiler, which seems about right.)

Along the way, Spark has collected much critical admiration—piquantly leavened with the occasional critical dissent—literary awards too numerous to list, endless academic comment, and, in 1967, an O.B.E. from Queen Elizabeth. Her latest book is a volume of autobiography, entitled *Curriculum Vitae*,[1] which sets forth the facts, personages, and occasions of Muriel Spark's life from 1918, when she was born, through 1957, when her first novel, *The Comforters*, was published. It presents the contingencies through which a precocious young woman became Muriel Spark, providing, as she hoped it would, a portrait of the young woman as an artist: a vivid if carefully cropped picture of her "formation as a creative writer." Concluding just as she crosses the threshold into literary maturity, the book ends with a

1 *Curriculum Vitae: Autobiography*, by Muriel Spark; Houghton Mifflin, 213 pages, $22.95.

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promise of a sequel dealing with the "work, many travels and adventures" as well as "friends, famous and obscure," that have filled her life since 1957.

Various rumors, half-truths, fabrications, and other types of falsehood have collected around Spark as they collect around many well-known writers. Part of her reason for undertaking *Curriculum Vitae*, she tells us, was to "put the record straight." To this end, she has not relied solely on her memory for corroboration of the events she recounts, but has endeavored "to write nothing that cannot be supported by documentary evidence or eyewitnesses." Spark professes a horror of untruth. "Lies," she warns, "are like fleas hopping from here to there, sucking the blood of the intellect." She regards with contempt the writer of a recent biography who could not understand why Spark should be irritated about the fabrications promulgated in her book since, after all, she had portrayed Spark "in a good light." "Be that as it might," Spark writes, "it was all untrue."

Some of the errors circulating about Muriel Spark can be traced to innocent mistakes that have assumed the patina of plausibility through constant repetition by critics and scholars. Other errors have their source in the animus of certain of Spark's former friends, especially Derek Stanford, with whom she collaborated on several literary projects in the early Fifties. Stanford, Spark tells us, was "bookish with scholarly leanings" but "wildly and almost constitutionally inaccurate." When he got around to writing about Spark in the 1960s (and then again in 1977), he seems to have produced farragoes of error and invention. For example, Stanford claims that Spark was in love with T. S. Eliot (in fact, she had never met him), that her grandmother had gypsy blood (a "picturesque proposition," Spark comments, for which no evidence exists), that he went with her to visit her "Uncle Solly" about money (there was no such relative). He thinks Proust wrote a book called *Recherche dans le temps perdu* and assures readers that the infant Muriel was suckled until she was two. ("How ridiculous!" was her mother's comment: "There must be something wrong with the man.") Spark provides only an incomplete list of Stanford's errors, but we get the point: *caveat lector*. And watch out for the silver, too: Spark reports that Stanford pilfered certain manuscripts of her early work and later tried to sell them back to her through an agent.

Curriculum Vitae opens in Edinburgh, the Morningside district, with Muriel's birth to Bernard and Sarah Camberg. Her father, an engineer, was of Scottish-Jewish descent; her mother, neé Uezzell, was from an English shopkeeping family in Watford. Philip, Muriel's only sibling, was the elder by five and a half years. Financially, the Cambergs were modestly but respectably situated: there were few luxuries, but then who went in for luxuries at that time in Edinburgh? Family life seems to have been chummy and reasonably cheerful. Sarah Camberg had suffered what Muriel describes as a nervous breakdown before her daughter was born, but the only aftereffects mentioned are a tendency to mild superstition and a dislike of being left alone. Religious education at school was standard-issue Presbyterianism, laced at home with a few Jewish observances.

Bernard Camberg's Jewishness presented no social problems for young Muriel—having grown up in Edinburgh, he fit right in—but her mother's Englishness was a recurrent source of small but memorable, mortifications. "'Foreigners' were something fairly tolerated, but 'the English' were something quite different," she recalls. Everyone knew that the English tended to be "superficial," "hypocritical," and "overdressed." They also talked funny. Not only did Sarah Camberg wear a coat trimmed with beige fox fur when she ought to have worn tweed or (if it was really cold) musquash (i.e., muskrat), but also she was overheard by her daughter to say to another mother at school: "I have some shopping to do." Spark remarks: "I nearly died. She should have said, 'I've got to get the messages.'"

This is a book bursting with such particularities. "Details fascinate me," Spark

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writes at the beginning of her chronicle. "I love to pile up details. They create an atmosphere. Names, too, have a magic, be they never so humble." Accordingly, the first part of *Curriculum Vitae* is a compilation of childhood details, a building-up of atmosphere. Sights, sounds, tastes, names, personalities, amusements. We learn about the neighborhood bakery, Howden's, and the kinds of bread they made; we visit the Buttercup Dairy where one purchased fresh butter from a pink-and-white complexioned girl; and we rehearse the proper method of making tea. "Everyone who came to the house was offered a cup of tea, as in Dostoyevsky." If served at five o'clock, tea was something one "took"; at six, one "ate" it. High tea, accompanied by kippers, smoked haddock, ham, and eggs, occurred at 6:30. Other details: her grandmother's clothes, for example. The "petticoats were voluminous, gathered at the waist; one in each set was cream-coloured or grey flannel, one was white linen edged with lace and one was black. My grandmother's stockings were black wool. They were kept up by pink elastic bands, her garters," etc. There are many such "piles" of detail in this short, relaxed, elegantly written book. As Miss Jean Brodie put it, in a somewhat different context: "For those who like that sort of thing . . . that is the sort of thing they like." (While on the subject of detail, it may be worth pointing out that aficionados of detail, and others, are likely to be frustrated by the book's lack of an index.)

Spark describes herself as an avid listener and "person-watcher" from an early age. One believes it. Young Muriel must have been a formidable creature to have around the house, listening, watching. When she was about "four or five," she recalls,

> I had been given a dolls' pram constructed for twins, with a folding hood at each end. My dolls, Red Rosie and Queenie, sat facing each other. I remember one day I was crying and bawling for some reason. My father fetched a face-cloth and wiped the faces of my two dolls, bidding them not to cry. I was so fascinated by this performance that I stopped crying, and I distinctly recall a sensation or instinct that, if I could have put it into words, would have been "I'm not taken in by his ruse, but at the same time what a good child-psychologist he is!"

And what a prodigious child psychologist was she.

Education was held in exceptionally high esteem in Edinburgh, and rich merchants vied with one another to found and endow schools. One such worthy was James Gillespie, snuff merchant, who died in 1797, leaving part of his fortune to found a school for boys and girls. (When Gillespie asked a friend for a motto for his carriage, Spark informs us, the friend proposed: "Wha wad hae thocht it / That noses had bocht it." Gillespie declined the couplet and used his initials instead.) Muriel entered the school at the age of five and spent twleve years there, "the most formative years of my life, and in many ways the most fortunate for a future writer." She was a clever student whose grades were good enough to secure a scholarship when she entered the High School. "After the age of twelve," she proudly reports, "I did not involve my parents in school fees."

At a time when allegations of "child abuse" are in the papers daily, it is refreshing to contemplate the relative innocence of social life in a city like Edinburgh in the 1920s. Spark tells a charming story about her history master, a Mr. Gordon. Being fond of her hair, Gordon would have Muriel sit in the front of the class so that he could stroke her hair while teaching. Because of "the universal decency of our school teachers' deportment," she notes, no one thought ill of him for it. "There was nothing whatsoever wrong with Jerry Gordon," she remarks. "The girls tittered quite a lot. I liked it quite a lot."

Among other attainments, James Gillespie's High School for Girls (as it came to be) was the original for the Marcia Blaine School for Girls that provides the setting for *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. An eccentric schoolmistress, Miss Christina Kay, pro-

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vided the inspiration for Jean Brodie. "I fell into Miss Kay's hands at the age of eleven," Spark writes. "It might well be said that she fell into my hands." Spark started writing about Miss Kay and her adventures even then.

Like her fictional counterpart, Miss Kay adorned her classroom walls with reproductions of paintings by Leonardo, Giotto, Botticelli, and other Italian masters; it was the late Twenties, and this lover of romance, again like her fictional counterpart, also displayed a newspaper clipping of Mussolini's fascisti marching along the streets of Rome. Spark does not say whether Miss Kay, like Miss Jean Brodie, walked with her head "up, *up*"; but Miss Kay did refer to her young charges as the "crème de la crème" and regaled them with stories of her travels in Rome, Egypt, Switzerland as well as the poetry of Wordsworth, Browning, Tennyson, Swinburne, Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, Walter de la Mare, Yeats, and (a favorite of Spark's) John Masefield.

Muriel Camberg was certainly one of Miss Kay's favorites, for she and a schoolmate accompanied her (at Miss Kay's expense) to the theater, to art galleries, and to Anna Pavlova's last tour of Edinburgh. From what Spark says, it seems that Miss Kay displayed the charm and imperiousness but not the deep moral ambiguity that distinguished Jean Brodie. One can imagine Miss Kay believing, with Miss Brodie, that the solution to mathematical problems was all well and good, but "quite useless to Sybil Thorndike, Anna Pavlova and the late Helen of Troy." One cannot imagine her trying to manipulate one of her former students into sleeping with a married man whom she herself loves but has forsaken. Miss Kay, Spark conjectures, would have put Miss Brodie "firmly in her place."

After the James Gillespie's School, the prospect of university was less than wholly appealing. Not only would a university career for the modestly situated Camberg girl be "something of a luxury" but also, Muriel noticed, "many older girls who were studying at Edinburgh University in those days were humanly rather dull and earnest, without adult style or charm, indeed there was a puritanical atmosphere." Instead of university, she took a course in précis writing, a discipline that shows itself in her trim, to-the-point writing to this day. "I love economical prose, and would always try to find the briefest way to express a meaning." She then taught in a small private day school where instead of pay she was given free tuition in shorthand and typing. This stood her in good stead when she put in a brief stint at an exclusive women's department store in Edinburgh working as a secretary to the owner. The department store provided some comic relief—Spark recalls overhearing "some of the most affected and absurd conversation between the clients and the saleswomen that I've ever heard in my life"—but essentially she was biding her time, waiting for the rest of her life to happen.

It began happening later that year, 1936, when Muriel met Sydney Oswald Spark at a club in Edinburgh. Thirteen years her senior, Spark was a teacher who was soon to depart for a three-year appointment in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). It is an exquisitely Sparkian detail that Sydney Spark should have been known as S.O.S. He was an emotional wreck and must have been emitting distress signals from the start. Muriel's parents sensed trouble, but she in her eagerness to get on with life—and out of Edinburgh—saw only the prospect of escape. "I thought him interesting, as I generally found 'older men.'" In 1937, Muriel became engaged to Spark and in due course followed him to Southern Rhodesia. She was then nineteen. Being underage, she had to cable her father for permission to marry. Reluctantly, he gave it.

Sydney Spark was, as she now acknowledges, a "disastrous choice." In Africa, he became more and more unbalanced and subject to fits of violence. Within two years Muriel was thinking of leaving him. In a calm and lucid moment, the wretched fellow said "One day this will all appear to you as a bad dream." He was right. "He became a borderline case," Muriel remarks, "and I didn't like

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what I found on either side of the border." When she became pregnant, Sydney tried to convince her to get an abortion. This form of murder was not the routine procedure it has become today, and Muriel refused. A son, Robin, was born in July 1938.

Because of her husband's quarrelsomeness, the Sparks were constrained to move around Southern Rhodesia a great deal. Domestically, Muriel admits, this was a "drawback." But a new toughness was dawning, and she points out that "drawbacks can be advantages if you think in the opposite direction." In those years, circumstances provided many occasions for thinking in the opposite direction. It might be said that Muriel Camberg got two good things from her husband, a son and a name: "Spark," as she implies, has more poetry in it than "Camberg." But she also got Africa. As the world tilted toward and finally collapsed into war, Muriel found herself trapped there, unable to arrange transport back to England.

Muriel Spark's sojourn in Africa was the opposite of pleasant: a failed marriage, poverty, little prospect of leaving before the end of the war, few friends with literary interests. (Doris Lessing was living someplace in Rhodesia at the time, but the two writers did not meet until many years later.) Nevertheless, she continued to write, poems mostly, and collected material for some of her best-known stories. Africa, as much as Edinburgh, formed her as a writer. It also made her an adult. It was in Africa, she says, that she "learned to cope with life." "It was there that I learned to keep in mind . . . the essentials of our human destiny, our responsibilities, and to put in a peripheral place the personal sorrows, frights and horrors that came my way."

Horrors there were aplenty. The racial situation was barbaric. The Afrikaner women with whom Muriel mingled were full of smug stories about how uppity blacks had been "fixed." There was, for example, the farmer who discovered a young black boy standing outside the window of his wife's room, peeping in at her while she breast-fed her baby. For this violation, the farmer shot the boy dead. The woman who told Spark this story only lamented that the farmer had been sent to prison for three years for killing the boy. "I was unable to speak," Spark reports. "I simply stared at the woman."

Racial barbarism took other forms as well. After leaving her husband, Muriel applied for a job in an Anglican convent school. The Mother Superior took a great liking to her, especially her fair "complexion and golden hair." During her second interview—there were four in all—the nun told her that there might indeed be an opening for her. "You see," she said, "the trouble with this war is the Jews. We need more people like you." She went on and on about the Jews and how right Hitler was. Muriel played along, fascinated to see how far the woman would go. But before the fourth interview she said to the woman,

> "Of course, I'm a Jew."
> She said, "It's not so."
> I said, "What isn't so?"
> She said, "What you *just said*."
> I took my fair skin and my golden locks right out of there.

Despite warnings about the dangers and privations, Muriel was aching to return to England before the war ended. Finally, in February 1944, she found transport on a troop-ship. She and the thirty or so other women who joined her were told not to undress for bed and to wear dark trousers. Dark clothes, a typed instruction sheet informed them, were advisable in case the boat should be torpedoed: sharks tended to overlook dark clothes. "I am sure," she writes, "this was a mess-room jollification."

After visiting her family in Edinburgh, Spark went to London to look for work. She stayed at the Helena Club, founded by a daughter of Queen Victoria for "Ladies from Good Families of Modest Means who are Obliged to Pursue an Occupation in London." This of course was the original of the May of Teck Club, the setting for *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), one of Spark's funniest books. Recalling events in 1945, when "all the

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nice people in England were poor, allowing for exceptions," the book peeks in on the life of half a dozen girls living at the club. "As they realized themselves in varying degrees, few people alive at the time were more delightful, more ingenious, more movingly lovely, and, as it might happen, more savage than the girls of slender means."

Spark landed a plum job with the Foreign Office after a woman at the employment bureau noticed that she was reading a novel by one of her favorite writers, Ivy Compton-Burnett. Spark became a Duty Secretary in the same division of military intelligence that employed Ian Fleming. Their job was psychological warfare or "black propaganda." "Black propaganda," she explains,

> was distinct from the BBC's white variety. Black took up the position that we were loyal Germans devoted to the Führer. From that point of view the news was presented in such a way that the Germans got the impression that they were listening to a German station. This was a camouflage for subtle and deadly anti-Nazi propaganda.

It was, she concludes, "detailed truth with believable lies"—a phrase that, suitably qualified, might double as a description of Spark's own technique as a writer.

After the war, Spark first worked as an editor and writer at a quarterly magazine called *The Argentor*, the official publication of the National Jewellers' Association. In 1947, she became editor of *Poetry Review*, the journal of the Poetry Society, where she stayed until 1949. It was a difficult job. Spark took the post partly because she was promised a flat. She never got the flat. But she did earn the abiding animosity of certain members of the Poetry Society who could not understand why she hesitated to print their poetic effusions. There was, for example, Robert Armstrong, "a physically and morally twisted, small, dark fellow," who was on the executive committee of the society. Spark published a poem of his which had been accepted by the previous editor, but she neglected to mention his name on the front cover. This brought an outraged letter from him on his business letterhead, H. M. Inspector of Taxes, Willesdon District. A battle ensued that ended only with Spark's departure from the *Poetry Review*.

Spark reserves some of her most delicious malice for another opponent of her innovations at the Poetry Society, Dr. Marie Stopes. Stopes, famous for her proselytizing activities on behalf of birth control, abominated any hint of experimentation in the realm of poetry. She instantly became Spark's bitter enemy and campaigned vigorously to have her removed as editor. Stopes often led meetings of the society, "literally shaking her fist and making inflammatory, wild pronouncements." Among other things, she wrote to ask if it was true that Spark's husband had divorced her. Spark's reply begins: "I have received your outrageously impudent letter. . . . My private affairs are no concern of yours and your malicious interest in them seems to me to be most unwholesome." Spark briskly acknowledges the beneficence of Stopes's prophylactic advocacy. Then she eviscerates her. "I met [Stopes] at one of our meetings and knew she disliked me intensely on sight. I was young and pretty and she had totally succumbed to the law of gravity without attempting to do a thing about it." Spark concludes wistfully, "I used to think it a pity that her mother rather than she had not thought of birth control."

After leaving the Poetry Society, Spark started a short-lived magazine called *Forum* with the financial help of some friends. In 1950, she wrote her study of Mary Shelley —now an overdone subject, but at the time quite out of the ordinary. She met and interviewed John Masefield, whom she also wrote about, and began her rocky collaboration with Derek Stanford. She was writing a great deal of poetry but found herself often entering the word "returned" in the ledger in which she kept track of the publications she sent her work to. Her first notable public success came in 1951 when her story "The Seraph and the Zambesi" won first prize (out of 6,700 entries) in a competition sponsored

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by *The Observer*. The judges were David Astor, editor of the paper, Philip Toynbee, and Terence Kilmartin. First prize was the then-handsome sum of £250. She gave £50 to her son for his bar mitzvah and also generously gave £50 to Derek Stanford, thus illustrating the principle that no good deed goes unpunished. She bought herself a blue velvet dress and a complete set of *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

"The Seraph and the Zambesi" was an important success. But it did not bring financial security. At one point in the early Fifties Spark had only one dress and her shoes had holes in them. In 1954, as a result of undernourishment and too much dexedrine, she fell ill and suffered from mild hallucinations. The hallucinations, however, turned out to be a godsend. They formed the inspiration for her first novel, *The Comforters* (written in 1955 but not published until 1957), in which the narrator hears voices and believes herself to be a character in the novel she is writing. Evelyn Waugh, noting the similarity between *The Comforters* and his book *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (also published in 1957), was full of praise in his review: "I was struck by how much more ambitious was Miss Spark's essay and how much better she had accomplished it."

On May 1, 1954, Spark was received into the Catholic Church at Ealing. Naturally, one recurrent question concerns her conversion. As a youth, she tells us, she had "no specific religion, but a strong religious feeling." What experiences, bafflements, convictions—what terrors, what joys—led this earnest half-Presbyterian, half-Jewish woman to make the turn to Rome in her mid-thirties? The book jacket of the English edition of *Curriculum Vitae* promises Spark's answer to this question. In the event, what she provides is a paragraph or so in the last few pages of the book. What can one say? Spark is as illuminating as one could be without being illuminating. She recounts the menu but doesn't attempt to describe the meal. Perhaps, in anything short of a spiritual *apologia*, this is as much as one can expect. A precipitating experience, she says, was her absorption in the theological writings of John Henry Newman in 1953. (Newman's writings figure, ambiguously, in some of Spark's novels, especially in *Loitering with Intent*.) But she doesn't divulge *what* Newman said or argued that swayed her. This is what Spark tells us:

> When I am asked about my conversion, why I became a Catholic, I can only say that the answer is both too easy and too difficult. The simple explanation is that I felt the Roman Catholic faith corresponded to what I had always felt and known and believed; there was no blinding revelation in my case. The more difficult explanation would involve the step by step building up of a conviction; as Newman himself pointed out, when asked about his conversion, it was not a thing one could propound "between the soup and the fish" at a dinner party. "Let them be to the trouble that I have been to," said Newman. Indeed, the existential quality of a religious experience cannot be simply summed up in general terms.

True, true. But somehow one wants a detail or two about the beliefs that helped build her conviction, some taste, some sample of the "existential quality" she has in mind. Newman, after all, provided the *Apologia pro Vita sua*. We have some hints in Spark's novels, to be sure, but works of fiction are not the same as a statement made *in propria persona*.

In any event, Spark's religious convictions have played a powerful, if somewhat elusive, role in her fiction. It might be said that they form the invisible core or center of her work. This has helped to confer depth and psychological complexity to her fiction, but may also account for the disturbing "otherworldly" quality much of it exhibits. Aristotle advised the poet to prefer probable impossibilities to improbable ones. It is an open question whether Spark's impossibilities are always suitably "probable." But *Curriculum Vitae* once again reminds us that she is a paid-up subscriber to another of Aristotle's dictums, that "the perfection of style is to be clear without being mean."

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From the workshop of Torres-García

by Karen Wilkin

Asked to describe the ideal exhibition, you might, understandably, come up with something like the recent Matisse retrospective at MOMA: a comprehensive, scholarly, illuminating effort, thoughtfully selected and sensitively installed, studded with works of dazzling excellence and authority. Yet there is another sort of show, more modest but almost as impressive, where the impact of the whole is far greater than the sum of its parts, where an arresting idea, intelligently presented and tellingly illustrated, is more important even than the character of its individual components. "El Taller Torres-García: The School of the South and Its Legacy," seen this winter in New York, was just such a show, a rewarding, informative introduction to a complex, obscure chapter in the history of New World modernism.[1] "El Taller" was the school-workshop that the Uruguayan-born painter Joaquín Torres-García (1874-1949) established in Montevideo in the 1930s; "The School of the South" loosely denotes the artists associated with him. The catalogue points out that this exhibition is "the first attempt to reconstruct the history and philosophy of El Taller Torres-García and the principal artists who participated in it." The organizers are to be congratulated for vividly bringing to life an extraordinary enterprise and a fascinating group of artists, both virtually unknown to New York audiences.

The peripatetic Torres-García, the master who conceived "The School of the South" as both metaphor and reality, is, of course, well known to anyone interested in twentieth-century art. He lived in New York, briefly, from 1920 to 1922, but for most of us here his reputation rests chiefly on the works of his Paris years, from the late 1920s and early 1930s. They are puzzling pictures that conflate geometric structure, vernacular references, and private symbols; their shorthand images and personal "alphabets," arranged the way that words or glyphs are inscribed on a page, are held in place by slightly unpredictable grids. At first acquaintance, these pictures seem aligned with the legacy of Cubism, but longer acquaintance reveals that their economically rendered, detached forms remain relatively intact, more like hieroglyphics than the fragments of a spatially complex actuality of Cubist practice.

Torres-García's work of this type was known to the Abstract Expressionist genera-

1 "El Taller Torres-García: The School of the South and Its Legacy" was on view at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, from October 22, 1992, through January 10, 1993. It was earlier seen at the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (June-August 1991), the Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, Austin, Texas (September-December 1991), and the Museo de Monterrey, Mexico (January-April 1992). It is now on view at the Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City (February-May 1993). A catalogue, edited by the curator, Mari Carmen Ramírez of the Huntington Gallery, has been published by the University of Texas Press (395 pages, $50; $29.95 paper).

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tion, even through first-hand experience, since there were examples in the influential Gallatin Collection, shown at New York University in the mid-1930s, and in the Museum of Modern Art. Such pictures continue to be regarded highly, but good as they are, they represent only one phase of the artist's complicated, multivalent evolution. The history of that evolution, like the history of the man himself, is an extraordinary tale.

During a career spanning half a century and three continents, Torres-García was variously artist, architectural decorator, theoretician, teacher, exhibition organizer, writer, publisher, and more; he was a passionate neo-classicist, a deliberate naïf, a missionary for modernism, a pragmatist, idealist, and metaphysician—sometimes all at the same time. In his restless years as an expatriate in Spain, France, and briefly in Italy and the U.S., he got to know a remarkable cross-section of some of the most adventurous artists and thinkers of the day, exchanging visits, corresponding with them, organizing exhibitions of their work, and publishing their writings. And, as the exhibition "El Taller Torres-García" made clear, he served as a source of information, inspiration, and leadership for an impressive number of serious artists in his native country—but I'm getting ahead of myself.

In 1891, a teen-aged Torres-García left Uruguay with his family for Catalonia, where his father's people had their origins. Trained at the Barcelona Academy of Fine Art and the Academia Baixas, a member of the Cercle Artistic de Sant Lluch (named for the patron saint of painters), a teacher at an experimental, progressive children's school, Torres-García was part of a group of enlightened Catalan artists and intellectuals. His friendship with the sculptor Julio González dates from these early years, that with Joan Miró from a decade or so later.

Torres-García started out as a fresco muralist working in a severe classicizing style. Greatly impressed by the French Neo-Classicist Puvis de Chavannes—who had a considerable effect, too, on the young Picasso, among others—and by the Italian painters of the early Renaissance, Torres-García studied fresco painting in Florence and Rome, returning to Barcelona to execute decorations for churches and public buildings. (Most of these have been painted over or destroyed.) Even then, theory and practice were inseparable for him; in his late thirties, he published his first theoretical book, a call for a return to a Mediterranean tradition of imagery and an approach derived from the Greco-Roman legacy. Not long after publication, however, Torres-García's work began to change, and by the late Teens, the cool figures of his murals were supplanted by freely painted urban scenes, densely packed with ships, trolleys, clocks, windows, and passers-by, pulled to the surface and cropped in a manner that announced their author's familiarity with Cubism, and a clarity of color that suggested an equal familiarity with Fauvism.

In 1920, Torres-García, his wife, and their children left Spain for New York, via Paris, where he visited Picasso, and Brussels. In New York, as part of John Graham's circle of displaced Europeans and young Americans, Torres-García got to know such vanguardists as Edgar Varèse, Jean Xceron, and Walter Pach, while his fresh, bold urban pictures attracted the attention of such supporters of advanced art as Katherine S. Dreier, a founder, along with Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, of the Société Anonyme, a forebear of the Museum of Modern Art. In 1921, Torres-García showed at the Whitney Studio Club—eventually the Whitney Museum of American Art—along with a young American whose free-wheeling interpretations of modern urban life were extremely sympathetic to those of his Latin American counterpart, Stuart Davis. (The New York years also saw Torres-García trying to do something profitable with the ingenious wooden toys he devised for his own children.) Despite this relatively easy entry into New York's small world of modernist art, the family decided to return to Europe in 1922 and, after a brief stay in Italy, an abortive effort to have the toys manufactured there, and

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a sojourn in the south of France, Torres-García finally settled in Paris in 1926.

Typically, he was soon associated with some of the city's most innovative artists, including Theo Van Doesberg, Piet Mondrian, Georges Braque, Juan Gris, the sculptors Jacques Lipchitz and Michel Seuphor, and the architect Le Corbusier—headier company than he had enjoyed in New York. The older Torres children were sent to study art with Amédée Ozenfant in his new studio designed by Corbusier, while Horacio, the youngest, born while the family was in Italy, attended "performances" of Alexander Calder's circus. Encouraged by his friendship with Van Doesberg, Mondrian, and Seuphor, and his contact with Ozenfant, Torres-García himself began to be interested in a purist approach and began to experiment with simplified geometric forms and grids based on the golden section, instead of the rapid allusions and empirical divisions of his cityscapes and harbor scenes; he retained, however, the sense of the hand and the vernacular flavor that distinguished his urban pictures. His nascent interest in African, Oceanic, and Pre-Columbian art began to manifest itself in his work as well, abetted perhaps by his eldest son Augusto's fascination with primitive art and growing expertise in the field. (Augusto had begun to collect African and North American Indian artifacts, and a job cataloguing Peruvian vessels at the Musée de Trocadéro—now Musée de l'Homme—where Picasso first encountered African sculpture, gave the young man access to the collections and opportunity to deepen his knowledge of tribal art.)

The paintings of these years are the ones with which Torres-García is most closely identified. At first glance, their increasing abstractness seems a repudiation of both the historicist illusionism of the Barcelona murals and the playful "Cubist-Fauvist" shorthand that followed, yet in a sense, Torres-García had always been an abstract artist; painting had never been for him the simple imitation of appearances. Neither was it a vehicle for unedited emotions. He was always more in sympathy with the aims of the "plasticiens" of Paris in the 1920s than with the Surrealists' dependency on the unconscious—although he seems to have valued highly the role of the unconscious in making associations between apparently unrelated images and forms. "Essential forms," in Ozenfant's phrase, interested him, not fleeting impressions or ephemeral feelings, and whether painting recognizable images or not, he sought always to reveal the "universal" abstract structures that lay beneath appearances. He found confirmation of his approach in the art of the remote past and of other cultures, perceiving that such structures were the core of archaic and tribal art, proof for him that abstraction was an international, timeless, wholly accessible language, not an arcane code for the few.

It's obvious, though, from both Torres-García's work and the program of study he was to devise for the students at El Taller that his art, unlike that of many of his Paris-based friends, was rooted in his intense responses to the world around him. In this, too, he resembled that young American he exhibited with at the Whitney Studio School. They would have agreed about the need to channel and discipline emotion in art as well, although they would have differed on the significance of pure geometry. The artist's task, for Davis, was to translate his perceptions of the day-to-day world and the emotions provoked by those perceptions into "objective" configurations, organized according to what he called "Color-Space-Logic." Pure geometric abstraction, however, he found limiting, devoid of the enlivening irregularities and unpredictability of daily experience.

Davis's life-long theme was modern urban life, with all its noise, speed, and incoherence, its technology included; some of his most celebrated early "still lifes" were of equipment to be found in the five-and-ten and the hardware store: percolators, light bulbs, electric fans, radio tubes. Torres-García, for all his devotion to modernism, preferred the handmade, the used, and the weathered to the machine-made, but he was no advocate of a return to the past. Quite the opposite. He was convinced that the mod-

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ernist artist had a significant role to play in modern society. Since he was privy to a kind of truth, the artist was obligated to share this truth, in order to help establish a new, better social and cultural order.

For Torres-García, there was nothing new in this wide-ranging notion of the role of art and artist, nor in the inseparability of art-making, practical activism, and theorizing. In Barcelona, in the Teens, he had been at the center of a movement to revitalize decorative arts in Catalonia. In Paris, in the late Twenties and early Thirties, he organized exhibitions to enlarge the audience for constructive art, and, with Michel Seuphor, founded the short-lived but important journal of constructivism, *Cercle et Carré*. Yet all this notwithstanding, Torres-García (typically, it seems) appears to have failed to establish himself or, at least, to establish himself as the kind of artist he wished to be, in Paris, just as he had in New York and Barcelona. And by the mid-1930s, Europe was changing, rocked by the beginnings of the upheavals that would lead to the Second World War. In 1934, after a short and unsuccessful sojourn in Madrid, Torres-García and his family returned to Montevideo, the birthplace he had not seen since he was not quite seventeen; he was sixty.

The city he found was small, sophisticated, even progressive in many respects, but virgin territory where advanced art was concerned, with no museums where modernist work could be studied first-hand, and for all practical purposes, no exhibitions. The inhabitants, mostly of Spanish and Italian descent, looked to traditional Europe as the standard and source of culture and the artifacts of culture. The artist who had been an intimate of vanguard circles in Europe and briefly, in New York, spent the last fifteen years of his life in this setting. He devoted them to bringing the message of modernism and of abstraction, or rather, his kind of abstraction, to his homeland. This undertaking was the subject of the exhibition "El Taller Torres-García."

He saw his mission, from the start, not as an individual but as a collective enterprise. What he had to offer was not merely his own presence as a single dedicated modernist practitioner, but a way of thinking, a system of principles that would foster the growth of an original American art—a "School of the South" that would encompass everything from public architecture to paintings to domestic furniture and utensils. Arriving with the authority of forty-three years in Spain and France, Torres-García was welcomed with respect and eagerness by a small circle of adventurous Uruguayan artists, for whom he represented a direct link with everything that was fresh, challenging, and exciting. They entered into his vision, assimilated his principles, and together formed the Asociación de Arte Constructivo. Their aim: to create a new art language for the Americas, informed equally by Torres-García's notion of universal construction and the inheritance of the ancient American past. (It should be pointed out, though, that Uruguay, unlike some Latin American countries, had no indigenous great Pre-Columbian tradition—no equivalent of Aztec, Inca, or Maya culture.)

With Torres-García's guidance, the group experimented with a wide range of materials and a fairly narrow range of formal conceptions, blurring the distinction between artist and artisan and often, between individuals. But according to the philosophy of Torres-García and the AAC, individuality was of little importance, although true originality, they believed, would inevitably manifest itself.

Although the exhibition began with the artists of the AAC, little has remained of what they produced in those years, so we were offered only tantalizing glimpses. The catalogue emphasizes how much has been lost by reproducing works that now exist only as images in *Círculo y Cuadrado*, the Spanish-French reincarnation of *Cercle et Carré*. (The publication was an important part of the group's activities, since it established an unprecedented dialogue between Torres-García's European artist-friends and the members of the AAC; texts by Hélion, Mondrian, Severini, Van Doesberg, and Varèse ap-

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peared with articles by Uruguayan artists.) The few works that have survived, by such artists as Héctor Ragni, Amalia Nieto, Rosa Acle, and Augusto Torres, demonstrated their debt to Torres-García's inspiration, as well as to Pre-Columbian prototypes; the complex repetitions and stylized serpentine motifs of Inca textiles and Maya reliefs, for example, dominated much of the AAC's art. In this context, especially, Augusto Torres's work stood out for its greater breadth of well-assimilated influences—his awareness of Klee, Picasso, and Gris was clear—but this is not surprising, given his European birth and education.

What was immediately plain was that the AAC's conception of a new language of art for the Americas had nothing to do with the self-conscious, sentimental regionalism of their North American equivalents, the American Scene painters, or with the equally self-conscious heroic-folkloric approach of their nearer neighbors, the Mexican muralists. (Davis agreed with them there, too.) Like the Mexicans, however, the Uruguayan artists wished to apply their principles publicly in what the catalogue text categorizes as "a new, anonymous, collective monumental art." The conservative Uruguayan public, however, was indifferent to these ambitions, and after mounting a series of exhibitions, issuing manifestos, and generally trying to raise public consciousness with little success, the AAC disbanded in 1942.

The AAC's successor was El Taller Torres-García—TTG—"an experimental training ground" where young artists could learn the principles and techniques of universal construction. The real strength of the exhibition was the work of the alumni of this informal, innovative school-*cum*-workshop, including many pieces produced during their student years. The paintings, sculptures, constructions, furniture, and other objects made by Torres-García's "disciples" served as concrete demonstrations of the master's thinking. In one of the catalogue's most provocative essays, the Uruguayan philosopher Juan Fló stresses the importance of the Montevidean years, particularly the period of the TTG, to any understanding of Torres-García's art and, especially, his erratic course. Each previous foray, Fló says, won the painter some recognition, but ended in "failure and exile." Torres-García, in Fló's view, was "always behind or ahead of his time." He was no less out of step in Montevideo, but there was no escape, no place to move to, so he was forced to clarify his thinking and his position. The result, according to Fló, was a decision to return art to "an archaic situation designed to integrate the individual, art, and the cosmos," which the course of study at the TTG was designed to foster.

Torres-García devised a six-step program. First the aspiring young artist was taught how to distill the world around him into fundamental elements of plane, line, and color. Color was then distilled into the three primaries, then into black and white, and finally into a restricted earthy palette of seven hues tempered by black and white. Perspective was explored, but never allowed to compromise frontality. The ultimate step was what Torres-García called "the recuperation of the object," when representation was once more the aim, but representation filtered through a by now intuitive perception of the geometric essences of all structures. As was habitual with the members of Torres-García's circle, the young artists were encouraged to experiment with a wide variety of methods, materials, and applications—iron, cement, ceramic, brick, stone, wood, and more, in addition to traditional paint on canvas or ink on paper. In part, this was simply a function of the reality of life in Uruguay in the 1940s. Materials were hard to come by, so an affection for the expressive properties of weathered wood and other recycled materials was almost a necessity. But it was also a deliberate choice, born of a desire to imbue the most humble non-art substances or the most banal objects with aesthetic value.

The students relied not only on their master's formal method and his choice of materials but also on his subject matter and imagery. They filled their pictures with the

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boats, cars, trolleys, derricks, locomotives, windows, and clocks of his urban harbor scenes, and appropriated, too, his alphabets —part Greek, part archaic Roman, "written" with a cuneiform rigidity—and his shorthand symbols: the heart for emotion, the sun and moon for the cardinal directions, the fish for nature and life, and so on. They took the scale of their works from the golden section that he advocated, their palette from his prescribed earth tones and primaries.

"Anonymous" and "collective" were indeed adjectives that came to mind in viewing both student efforts and works by alumni. It was often difficult, if not impossible, to tell who had done what. But that made it no less interesting to follow the TTG's course of study through examples executed at each stage of the program. And true to Torres-García's beliefs, some individuals declared themselves. Augusto Torres's accomplished pictures stood out throughout the exhibition. (Never mind an extremely odd painting from the AAC years of two horses in harness seen head on, showing their teeth.) Julio Alpuy's solemn, witty constructions, like urbanized, vernacular Nevelsons, and his brilliant red-yellow-blue watercolors and canvases made their presence felt, as did José Gurvich's obsessively repetitious images—these from the last days of El Taller's existence. But paintings and constructions constituted only a small part of what the TTG aspired to; the ultimate aim was a total environment achieved through the integration of a variety of arts and some of the most impressive work in the exhibition bore witness to how vital this notion of integration really was at the TTG. Gonzalo Fonseca's ceramics, vessels of ancient American shapes banded with the symbols and alphabets of the Torres-García initiates, along with Fonseca and Alpuy's decorated furniture and boxes, were among the most surprising works exhibited, while Horacio Torres's lamp and wrought-iron gates were handsome and original. (Photographs of the Torres home and a series of now-destroyed murals, in the catalogue, suggested the richness of this part of the TTG's activities.)

This kind of modernist unification of the arts was, of course, not unique to the TTG. The Bauhaus and its American descendent, Black Mountain College, are obvious prototypes. But the Bauhaus sought not only to unite artist, artisan, architect, and performer, but to put the newest technology at their disposal. The TTG, for all its avowed modernism and its fondness for experimental, non-art materials, was closer in spirit to the nostalgic revivalism of the Arts and Crafts movement, sharing its admiration for the handwrought and aversion to the mass-produced. The Omega Workshop of Bloomsbury's heyday offers a parallel as well. The TTG's production seems superior, possibly because the decoration and basic forms of their furniture and objects are conditioned by a profound sense of geometry. There's none of the sense of arbitrarily imposed imagery so characteristic of the Omega Workshop's efforts, where figures, fruits, and flowers more at home on the Bloomsbury painters' canvases appear to have been splashed rather randomly on hearthrugs, screens, fabrics, and bookbindings, for no compelling reason.

The final part of the exhibition dealt with the legacy of El Taller Torres-García, which with some new members and a core of original alumni, endured after its founder's death in 1949 until 1962, functioning as school and workshop, executing public commissions, exhibiting, and publishing. According to the evidence of the show, a respectable number of Latin American artists carried on its principles. Some, originally associated with the TTG, such as Fonseca or Francisco Matto, continued to produce extremely competent work that derived logically from their training at the workshop —minimally altered found objects, usually of weathered wood, for example, arranged in confrontational totems—but often it became a little precious, a little *artful*, in the European manner. Others, like Julio Alpuy, saturated the vocabulary of the TTG with more evident metaphysical, quasi-Surrealist meaning. Augusto Torres, however, who in the glory days of the TTG was capable of

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manipulating paint and line with a searching sensuality reminiscent of Giacometti, remained a painter worth paying attention to.

The Argentine painter Miguel Angel Rios, one of the better known artists in the last portion of the show, is more than a generation younger than most of the TTG circle, yet his work offered convincing evidence that the TTG's alphabets, symbols, and structural principles survive, translated into a loose, painterly materiality that puts the language of universal construction into the service of art about its own making. But the most provocative—and some of the best—works in the "Legacy" portion of the show were those of Horacio Torres, the youngest son, educated at the TTG, an accomplished practitioner of universal construction and an even more accomplished applier of its principles to domestic and public environments. Yet toward the end of his all too short life (he died in 1976 at fifty-two) Torres turned his back on the modernist teachings of his father and began a series of extraordinary figurative paintings, deeply informed by the High Renaissance—especially Titian—in touch, palette, and composition, but at the same time wholly twentieth-century in their materiality, their bold cropping, and their presence. Torres remains, in my view, too little known, too little appreciated. Perhaps in these days of fascination with "appropriation" his dialogue with the past will qualify him for re-evaluation. I've been an admirer of Horacio Torres's figurative work for more than twenty years, so I must confess that one of the most interesting aspects of "El Taller Torres-García" was the chance to see his origins in some detail, information that makes his late work all the more arresting —which is not to discount the value of the early work. A spare *Study for Still Life* (1949, Estate of the Artist), a solidly constructed but ample arrangement of coffee pot, clock, peppers, and newspapers, was worth seeing in any context.

The catalogue's useful chronology, along with its documentary photographs and essays, suggests that, even in its later years, the TTG was reasonably successful in obtaining commissions for murals, constructions, and decorative schemes for public places. They obviously had a small group of loyal supporters—a few enlightened architects who solicited their collaboration, for example— but the general reception for the TTG's efforts was not enthusiastic. The group's most ambitious project, a complex suite of monumental murals and decorations for a hospital, conceived as an integrated scheme that would enhance the patients' total well-being, was greeted with great hostility and viciously attacked by the press. (Sadly, the major murals, restored in 1974, were destroyed in a fire in 1978.) The attacks continued, even after Torres-García's death. In the 1950s, Abstract Expressionism began to penetrate Latin America and the same critics who had accused him of being too avant-garde now declared that the artists of the TTG were behind the times, while Torres-García himself was said to have had no personal style.

According to the catalogue, Torres-García felt that he had failed in his self-imposed mission to create an art for the Americas—not just Latin America—distinct from the art of Europe. He felt that he had failed to tap a particularly American source. The Pre-Columbian work that he admired, that he saw as an indigenous, time-honored precursor of his notion of abstraction was as unfamiliar to most of his fellow Uruguayans as his own most rigorous constructions. Regretfully, he concluded, his own sensibility was that of a European. Yet the exhibition made clear that Torres-García had reason to be proud of his legacy. Even allowing for the large amount of work lost or destroyed, it was evident that his school produced work of a distinctive, special character. Perhaps more important, it clearly exposed a generation of Latin American artists to a philosophy, an imagery, and a conception of what art can be that couldn't be found elsewhere in South America, while Torres-García's teachings and example stimulated work of serious ambition and respectable quality.

It would, though, have been helpful and extremely illuminating to have seen more of Torres-García's own art in the exhibition. (A

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larger amount is illustrated in the catalogue; apparently, some works proved unavailable because of internecine wrangles with the artist's estate, which is our loss.) More of Torres-García's works might have helped clarify the differences between the master and his entourage. As it is, Torres-García remains a slightly mysterious figure, a challenging artist whose work and career continue to provoke questions.

What, for example, is the relationship between Torres-García's works of the Twenties and Thirties and Adolph Gottlieb's Pictographs of the Forties? Gottlieb must have been aware of Torres-García's pictures, both from magazine reproductions and originals, when he was painting the Pictographs, and, as a member of John Graham's circle in the 1920s, he could have known Torres-García during his New York years. Superficially, the two series are similar: both are arrangements of personal symbols and images contained by grids. But Torres-García's pictures are packed with images the way a storage wall is packed with objects and, no matter how simplified, each image is rooted in observed actuality. Gottlieb's "glyphs" are disembodied, calligraphic, richly suggestive, but non-specific. His grids momentarily hold together these ambiguous symbols, but they "read" across and beyond individual compartments, setting up complex shifts of scale and rhythm across the surface of the canvas. Far from being declarations of universal, logical order, Gottlieb's pictures are testimony to the power of the collective unconscious. The more closely one looks, the more different the pictures are, yet at the same time, their relationship is equally plain. It's a connection that merits further investigation.

Two final comments. First: the catalogue of "El Taller Torres-García," as a pioneering effort, modestly disclaims any possibility of being comprehensive or exhaustive, yet it is an impressive document, scrupulously researched, handsomely presented, well illustrated, and extremely informative. As an introduction to the absorbing history of the TTG, its origins, its philosophy, and its evolution, the catalogue seems quite definitive. In addition to essays by the show's organizers and other contributors, it includes translations of Torres-García's writings, excerpts from the manifestos, biographies, and exhibition histories of all artists included in the show, plus a wide range of documentary photographs and fairly accurate reproductions of works in the exhibit. All in all, a valuable document.

Second: I'm always slightly embarrassed at how little I know about Latin American art. It has something to do with which languages I speak and where I have and haven't traveled, but it isn't easy to be informed about either the historical or current art of our southern neighbors from what is regularly shown in New York museums and galleries. A large exhibition currently being planned by the Museum of Modern Art is supposed to remedy that, but the way "El Taller Torres-García" was presented here is typical. In Madrid, it was shown at the newest, chicest exhibition space in town, the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, and while the Bronx Museum of the Arts should be congratulated for having taken the show and for having installed it generously and handsomely, it is not exactly a central location. With all respect, and without casting aspersions on the Bronx and its inhabitants, I can't help wondering why a show of this seriousness, depth, and ambition wasn't installed where a larger cross-section of the museum-going public might have seen it. Explanations involving demographics and the content of the exhibition come to mind, of course, but isn't relegating Latino art to the outer boroughs condescending? Isn't the whole point of multiculturalism to bring the "marginalized" into the "mainstream," not to enlarge the ghetto?

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The false philosophy of Peter Singer

by Jenny Teichman

I want to argue that false philosophy can be dangerous, and to suggest that, if circumstances prevent its being refuted in print, it is probably all right, in extreme cases, to try to silence it in other ways. I shall take as my example a philosophy that can be contrasted with humanism and that I shall call "personism." But first a few remarks about the influence of philosophy in general.

In Book 1 of his *Treatise on Human Nature*, David Hume writes that "errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous." F. H. Bradley, on the other hand, says in *Ethical Studies* that "the man of mere theory is in the practical sphere an useless and dangerous pedant." It is quite possible that Hume was being ironical. Leaving that aside, though, it seems to me that his thesis is wrong, whereas Bradley's has more than a grain of truth in it. Hume's thesis is wrong, firstly because there is no general reason why an error could not be dangerous as well as ridiculous, secondly because some doctrines are both philosophical and religious, and so on his own showing can be both ridiculous and dangerous. And, thirdly, Hume thinks bad philosophy is harmless because he holds that human reason is inactive. If this were so then good philosophy, and religion, and science would be just as ineffective as he takes bad philosophy to be. But that can't be right.

In August 1991 Peter Singer published an article in *The New York Review of Books* called "On Being Silenced in Germany"; eight months later another paper from his word processor, "A German Attack on Applied Ethics," appeared in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. Singer, a professor of philosophy at Monash University in Victoria, Australia, and a founder of the Monash Centre for Human Bioethics, wrote these two essays partly as the result of his own recent experiences in Germany.

In the essay in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* Singer writes:

> Since 1989 I have been unable to lecture openly at universities and conferences in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Courses based on my book *Practical Ethics* have been repeatedly disrupted and have had to be abandoned. A conference . . . had to be removed from Germany to the Netherlands . . . The 15th International Wittgenstein Conference [August 1991] was cancelled because of objections to some of the invited speakers [including] myself . . .

Singer is indignant about these events. It would appear that he regards them as attacks on the freedom of expression and as personal insults to himself. Although he does not explicitly say so in the paper quoted, it seems probable that he adheres to the conventional doctrine of the sanctity of free speech.

Singer's indignation reminds us that we need to distinguish between freedom of expression and the special right or privilege of addressing the world at large from a public platform. The first is a basic human right.

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The second is essentially a privilege attaching to certain professions: to priests, politicians, editors, journalists, TV programmers, academic bigwigs, and the like. I think it is impossible for everyone to have this privilege because if everyone had it it would cease to exist. If everyone were a priest there would be no congregation and so no sermons, if everyone were a professor there would be no students and so no lectures. It follows that the privilege of regular access to this or that type of public forum is not a basic human right. In any case it is completely unrealistic to imagine that Singer's regular access to public platforms is a privilege shared by the ordinary people who picketed his talks in Germany.

Freedom of expression is exercised in different ways. In countries where the right is respected, you can exercise it by speaking openly to your friends, and by writing letters to politicians, and through peaceful demonstrations, and by picketing Peter Singer's lectures. In unfree countries you can try circulating letters in samizdat and you can try sitting down in Tiananmen Square. If worst comes to worst you can throw yourself under Soviet tanks in Budapest or Prague.

It is important for freedom generally that the professional privilege of addressing the public at large should exist, and should not be hampered by government; but that doesn't mean that the rest of us are obliged to sit around in reverential silence. Professors and others abuse the privilege of the public forum when they jeer at women, or insult the Jews, or stir up hatred and incite people to violence. In my opinion the privilege is badly abused when academics call for the deaths of unwanted children or other innocent human beings. This particular misuse is also cowardly. The bioethics lobby never targets anybody who might be able to hit back.

Unlike Solzhenitsyn, Peter Singer will never go to jail, nor will he ever lose his job. He can say whatever he likes and write whatever he likes. If people don't want to read what he writes, or don't want to have him preaching "euthanasia" in their own backyards, then his plight is about as bad as the plight of those many ordinary citizens who can't persuade newspapers to publish their letters.

Nevertheless, Singer obviously feels aggrieved. "Initially," he writes in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*,

> the German opposition to applied ethics focused on my own writings and in particular on my support for euthanasia in the case of severely disabled newborn infants . . . [my] position is, of course, at odds with the conventional doctrine of the sanctity of human life, but it is shared by several philosophers and bioethicists.

In a footnote he lists eight books whose authors are in general agreement with his position and says that "many more could be added."

It is indeed true that, although there are distinguished exceptions (Anscombe, Finnis, Foot, Uniacke, Coady, Ford), many, perhaps most authors working in the field of bioethics are opposed to so-called "conventional" ideas and in general agreement with Singer's views. Perhaps this partly explains why people in Europe attempted to silence him; in their eyes he represented, not freedom, but the oppressive power of an elite.

I am not in a position to know if any of the many Germans, Austrians, and Swiss whose actions caused the cancellation of lectures and conferences had first attempted to refute Singer in print. Perhaps they had, but couldn't find publishers or publicity. Maybe they weren't philosophers or medics and so couldn't get lecture slots in conferences on bioethics. Perhaps they wrote letters to newspapers that were suppressed at the behest of bioethicists (this once happened to me). Or maybe they just felt unable to tackle a professor on his own ground. Who knows? Be that as it may, it won't do for Singer to complain if I exercise my right to free expression by setting out to refute him in print.

When Singer explained his views on euthanasia in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* and *The New York Review of Books* he was surprisingly economical with the truth. He

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misrepresented the contents of his book *Practical Ethics* to a very serious degree. Thus in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* Singer speaks only of his "support for euthanasia in the case of severely disabled newborn infants," whereas in his book he argues that a far wider range of human beings can rightly be killed.

In his book he asserts that human beings *qua* human beings have no right to life: "The wrongness of killing a being cannot depend on its species." In his book he asserts that killable infants need not be defective: "The only difference between killing a normal infant and a defective one is the attitude of the parents."

These two statements are in stark contrast with the clear implication of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* paper that *only defective newborns* may be killed on Singerian principles.

Both the above quotations come from Chapter 2 of *Practical Ethics*. In the same chapter we read that killable infants need not be newborn: Singer states that it is perfectly all right for fertile parents to kill a month-old hemophiliac baby in order to replace it with a more healthy one. Waiting for a month will give its biological or adoptive parents time to assess the degree of its illness, and to decide whether they really want it. Singer says that infants are "replaceable" and that it is all right to replace an infant by killing it and conceiving another. (It is interesting to note that in Arabia, in primitive times, female infants were replaced by males in this manner, as we know from the Koran, which condemns the practice as a terrible crime.)

Nor need killable infants be very young: Singer states that children who do not yet understand they are persons are not persons, and can be killed if they are not wanted by their parents. But at what age do children acquire a concept of personhood? Is it two? Or four? Or seven? Must the child be able to articulate its belief? And what is the status of a child who knows it can think but believes that *all* human beings are persons? Singer does not address himself directly to these questions, but his stated principles appear to imply that those who lack a right to life include inarticulate human children, and even articulate children (or adults) whose understanding of what constitutes a person differs from Singer's own.

Thus it turns out that Singer thinks that just about any child can be killed if there are no potential adopters and the parents don't want that particular child. In support of this idea he says on pages 131-2 of *Practical Ethics*: "No infant, defective or not, has as strong a claim to life as a person." (The Singerian distinction between human beings and persons will be dealt with below.)

Some of the people in Europe who opposed Singer's lecturing there were cripples in wheelchairs. One can understand why such individuals would find his conclusions distasteful. If Singer's principles had been adopted when these lifelong cripples were infants they might not have lived to protest against his book.

Is Singer blind to the distasteful character of his opinions? The fact that he glosses and distorts his doctrines when explaining them in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* seems to show either that he is capable of insincerity or (to give him the benefit of the doubt) that he is not completely blind. Maybe an original blindness was partly cured by witnessing those wheelchairs lined up outside the conference centers.

That Singer's doctrines are supported by many authors in the bioethics field does not show they are right. Bioethics is at the "pop" end of philosophy, and like "pop" newspapers, it keeps itself afloat by constructing bad-news stories. You thought doctors ought to stick to the Hippocratic Oath? Bad news! Singer says they don't have to! You thought everyone had a right to life? Bad news! Bioethicists say only some human beings have this right! You thought experimentation on living human flesh went out with Nazism? Bad news!! Clever professors at Monash say such experimentation is OK!

On the other hand, the fact that Singer's ethical doctrines entail distasteful conclusions that he himself sometimes tries to disguise is not quite enough to show they are

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wrong. To show conclusively that they are wrong we need to look at the history of the doctrines, and, more importantly, at their underlying premises or assumptions. This I shall now do.

Singer, as far as I know, is not a religious believer. Nonbelievers, including me for example, often call themselves humanists. It is important to understand that Singer has no right to that title. A humanist is one who places value on human enterprises like art and learning, and ultimately on human beings as such. Singer denies that human beings as such have any intrinsic value, hence he is a non- or anti-humanist. I think the best label for him and for those who agree with him is "personist."

What are the underlying assumptions of Singer's personism? His basic premises or assumptions consist of a dogma and a definition. *The dogma*: nothing in the universe has any intrinsic value except happiness and pleasure (utilitarianism). *The definition*: a person is a conscious thinking being. From these premises all kinds of things are inferred, for example:

1. Human life *per se* has no intrinsic value;
2. Not all human beings are persons;
3. Only human beings who know they are persons are persons;
4. Persons as such have rights; human beings as such have no rights;
5. Several sorts of human beings have no right to life.

In *Practical Ethics*, Singer lists the kinds of human beings who have no right to life, explicitly mentioning not only disabled newborn infants but also month-old hemophiliac infants not wanted by their parents or adopters, any young infant not wanted by its parents or adopters, and all human beings who do not know they are persons.

I will not stop to ask whether conclusions 1 to 5 actually follow from the two basic assumptions. Rather I will ask what reasons, if any, are offered by Singer in support of those assumptions. Apart from an appeal to authority (Locke's) and some rather vague and unevidenced references to "current intuitions," Singer offers no reasons in support of his premises. They are effectively treated as axiomatic, and can therefore be rightly rejected by all those who, like the German, Austrian, and Swiss objectors, have humanistic intuitions and different axioms.

The dogma that only happiness has intrinsic value rests on nothing stronger than the intuitions of utilitarians: Jeremy Bentham, J. S. Mill, Peter Singer and (presumably) his bioethicist friends. In other words, it is a dogma pure and simple, and if your intuitions tell you it is false it is perfectly OK to reject it, whether or not you can "put something else in its place."

The definition comes from Locke, who would not, however, have accepted the inferences that Singer draws from it. Locke's definition in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is as follows: A person is "a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself."

On this definition personhood consists in memory, reason, consciousness, and self-consciousness. It does not consist in being human.

Now several philosophers have drawn attention to the logical howlers engendered by Locke's definition. Singer, though, is not interested in any logical howlers to be found in Locke's thought, but rather in what he sees as that philosopher's "impeccable" authority: "This sense [of the word 'person'] has impeccable philosophical antecedents. It comes from John Locke."

Yet when Singer draws ethical conclusions from the definition, he decides after all to ignore the "impeccable" authority. For it's clear that Locke would have rejected personism—firstly because he was a Christian, secondly because he believed in *natural* rights (and natural rights can only belong to a natural species), and thirdly (as implied in Chapter 27 of the *Essay*) because he held that it's important for justice that *neither* persons *nor*

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human beings (human bodies) be wrongly punished.

Why does it matter how "person" is defined? Well, it would not matter if the concept of "human being" could retain its moral import *come what may*.

Note that in ordinary life the word "person" is strongly humanistic. Outside philosophy and religion its meaning is governed by the fact that its extension is in practice the same as the extension of the term "human being." In other words, in ordinary life "person" and "human being" refer to the same things. For this reason the *ordinary* sense of the word "person" does not, indeed cannot, detach moral import from the concept of the human. The case is otherwise with the Singerian view of personhood, because when Singer draws his distinction between human beings and persons he carefully detaches moral import from his idea of the human and transfers it to his idea of the person. A humanist deciding to draw the same unsound quasi-Lockean distinction might well detach moral import from "person" and attach it to "human being." But remember that Singer is not a humanist.

Consider the statement that "the wrongness of killing a being cannot depend on its species." Where does this thesis come from? How did Singer discover it? The answer is: It has been derived, ultimately, from nothing stronger than an arbitrary definition of the word "person." That definition is arbitrary indeed: it does not mirror ordinary use (because ordinary use equates persons with human beings), it does not mirror legal use (ditto, roughly), it does not describe a naturally existing class of natural objects (such as a species), and it does not even mirror Locke (for the reasons explained above).

Singer's philosophical procedures just aren't good enough. It is obvious that nothing of any significance can be derived from arbitrary definitions and/or the subjective intuitions of Bentham and a bunch of bioethicists.

After appealing to authority and intuition Singer attempts to rebut opposition with tendentious adjectives and irrelevant accusations. Thus he describes the doctrine of the sanctity of life as "conventional," as if it were analogous to conventions about what side of the shirt has the buttonholes. And he says that his opponents' intuitional apparatus has been spoiled by ancestral adherence to outmoded religious beliefs.

These moves aren't good enough either. It is absurd to reject an ethic merely because it is, or was, or could be part of a religious belief system. And if *human life itself* has only conventional importance it becomes terribly hard to see how Singer's wish to speak at conferences could have any importance whatsoever. Moreover, to describe the value of human life as a matter of mere convention is contrary to all experience of what human beings value. Of course human beings value human life. Of course they don't think their own lives, and other human lives, are conventionally rather than intrinsically important.

In Singer's bioethics, "person" is an honorific term. The persons of bioethical theory are almost godlike beings when compared to ordinary men, women, and children. Persons have dignity, and they alone among human beings have an unchallengeable right to life. Persons who are not persons (if I may put it that way) do not have dignity, and their rights, if any, are relative or conventional. The persons of bioethics are much better people than human beings because they are constituted by consciousness, self-awareness, intelligence, memory, foresight, knowledge of the concept of person, etc., etc., etc. Strange to say the persons of bioethical theory seem to be almost immaterial. At the very least they always possess big dualistic wardrobes.

Even if Singer is not religious, he does have a kind of theology. His ideas resemble those of religions that say that one has to belong to a special group—the baptized, the circumcised, the elect, or whatever. In some religions membership in a special group is thought to be a way of avoiding getting sent to an unpleasant place such as hell. Some-

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what similarly membership of the special group picked out by the bioethicists goes with protection from mundane destruction because it's argued that the favored group has a real right to life. Since the favored breed consists of persons who know they are persons in the Singerian sense, no one could possibly be more special, more protected, than the bioethicists themselves.

Singer expounds his personistic ethical system in many places, including all his books but one. The system, which is his lifework, depends crucially on the two foundational premises mentioned above, and especially on the arbitrary quasi-Lockean distinction between human beings and persons. It would be terribly hard for Singer to give up those premises, this distinction, because if he did his lifework would collapse. I hope to have shown that a collapse may in the end be inevitable. Of course that will be sad for Singer, but he himself seems to imply that refutation is less painful than suppression by popular demo.

Let us end by returning to the words of F. H. Bradley:

> The man of mere theory is in the practical sphere an useless and dangerous pedant. . . . [The best adviser] is the man who from his own knowledge, and by sympathy, can transport himself into another's case: who knows the heart.

It is interesting to speculate about whether Bradley believed that pedantic dangers can be avoided, and, if so, what prophylactic he would have recommended. Refutation might not do the trick, especially if the pedantry rests on an intuition. Mass demonstrations in support of a different intuition might well be more effective.

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The world & Peter Taylor

by Bruce Bawer

Born in 1917, the short-story writer Peter Taylor has from the beginning of his long and distinguished career had something about him of the old-fashioned literary man. His stately prose style—which in recent years has, like that of his idol Henry James's late period, grown increasingly elaborate and periphrastic—seems to hearken back to some gentler, quieter era when people didn't need to shout to be heard and weren't in quite so much of a hurry to say what they had to say, to a corner of the world where conversation was regarded as an art and language as a kind of music, and to a society in which people were accustomed to drawing, and regarded it as their solemn responsibility to draw, meticulous ethical (and, alas, class) distinctions. What's more, his at once formal and conversational tone, his legalistic precision and composure, and his way of approaching a story in the manner of a conscientious jury, coolly and patiently sifting through evidence in search of the precise moral truth of a complex human situation, constantly remind one that Taylor comes from a long line of Tennessee lawyers and lawmakers.

Wordsworth wrote that poetry "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." One might say much the same thing of Taylor's stories, many of whose narrators are Southern gentlemen whom one can picture sitting comfortably at one or another of the faculty "smokers" that crop up from time to time in the Taylor *oeuvre* as they tell us in measured sentences about their lives and families and careers. So cool and collected, indeed, are many of these narrators that some readers may actually become frustrated by their undeviating equipoise, which, especially given the stories' often highfalutin social settings, and the rather pontifical air that often accompanies the narrators' composure, may come off as a manifestation of smugness or stuffiness or superiority. Some may even be angered, or feel confined, by Taylor's insistence upon viewing so many events through what may appear to be a single narrow upstairs window, and at his apparent unwillingness to consider now and then how a story might look from the point of view of someone other than the head of the household—his wife, say, or his black chauffeur, or the high-school girlfriend who wasn't from a good enough family to marry.

Yet to regard these qualities of tone and perspective as deficiencies is to fail to grasp the nature of Taylor's literary strategies. His stories' fierce equipoise, for instance, is an implicit assertion of the importance of order and civilization, the need to reflect seriously upon and to attempt to understand one's experiences rather than merely to record raw, immediate sensations; to read Taylor is to be reminded constantly that life and art alike, if they are to be successfully carried off, require the exercise of will, intellect, steely self-discipline. If his stories frequently feel claustrophobic, moreover, this is at least in part a means of suggesting that every individual's perspective has severe limitations, that

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members of any except the most anarchic of families are subjected in some degree to the will and whims and *Weltanschauung* of other family members, and that to live by the standards of any civilized society is to accept, for good and bad, the sometimes chafing restrictions that that society's values and conventions impose upon one's personal freedom.

Although some of his sixty-odd stories and two novels are set in places as diverse as Washington and Saint Louis and New York, Taylor's chief setting has always been his home state of Tennessee, and his characters have tended to belong to the kind of family from which Taylor himself hails—that is, an old, proud, and long-established Tennessee clan that is intensely aware of its lofty social position and its distinguished forebears and that takes for granted its house servants and debutante balls and country-club membership. In one story after another, Taylor places characters in public roles and dramatic situations that correspond closely to roles and situations that figure in his family history. If many of his protagonists have grandfathers who were illustrious Tennessee statesmen, for instance, it is because several members of Taylor's own family were politicians, the most notable being his maternal grandfather, who served in turn as a Tennessee congressman, governor, and senator; if the father of more than one Taylor character is betrayed by a business partner, it is because Taylor's father underwent just such an experience; and if a well-to-do family's removal from one locality to another is viewed in more than one story as an extremely traumatic change that dramatically affects every aspect of the family's life, it is because the removals of Taylor's family from Trenton, Tennessee, to Nashville, then to Saint Louis, and finally (when he was fifteen) to Memphis were in fact, for the young author-to-be, major emotional upheavals that had manifold and abiding effects on his life and thought.

These family distinctions and disasters, it should be noted, often figure not in the narrative present of a Taylor story but rather in its sometimes almost mythic background, helping to provide a historical and moral context for the incidents of the story and serving to remind us of the often extreme changes that have taken place over the decades in the rules and assumptions by which Americans live. These bits and pieces of family history shed light, too, on the motivations of characters who are, in one way or another, the products of a past that was different in many ways from the present. Repeatedly, Taylor's stories inquire into the effect upon the human condition of changing times and of changing places—and, particularly, into the ways in which these changes compel people to compromise their ideals or convictions, or drive them into hermitry, bitterness, professional failure, or social disgrace, or inspire them to acts of moral courage and determination of which they might not have thought themselves capable. The narrator of the story "The Old Forest" expresses a view that informs much of Taylor's work when he says of his pre-World War II youth that "life *was* different in those times," explaining that nowadays

> acts of terror are, so to speak, all around us—everyday occurrences—and are brought home to us audibly and pictorially on radio and television almost every hour. I am not saying that some of these ugly acts of terror did not need to take place or were not brought on by what our world was like in those days. But I am saying that the context was different. Our tranquil, upper-middle-class world of 1937 did not have the rest of the world crowding in on it so much. . . . everything seemed quiet and well-ordered and unchanging. The households were in a context like themselves.

For every Taylor character who, stung by the ways of the post-World War II world, has made certain adjustments in order to acquire or retain a respectable role in that world and thereby (as the narrator of the story "Dean of Men" puts it) to "somehow go on living among men," there is a Taylor character who, unwilling or unable to adapt to that world, has become a recluse. The irony of many a Taylor story is that, as the narrator of "Dean

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of Men" observes, "once a human type is perfected—or almost perfected—it immediately becomes an anachronism and has no place in society." And the lesson of many a Taylor story is that, as the narrator's "society girl" fiancée observes in his extraordinary tale "The Old Forest," "[p]ower, or strength, is what everybody must have some of if he—if she—is to survive in any kind of world." Taylor's stories remind us continually that while one can learn lessons from the past about how to be a good citizen or parent or business partner, it can take the better part of a lifetime to learn those lessons, and in any event those lessons may not, in and of themselves, be sufficient to the distinctive challenges posed by a world radically different from that in which one was raised.

Or perhaps one should say "worlds," for Taylor's characters tend to be conscious of themselves not only as Americans but also, and generally even moreso, as Southerners, Tennesseeans, residents of their particular communities, and—most of all—members of their families. Indeed, family is at the center of most of Taylor's fictions; and roles, both familial and social, are exceedingly important. Almost invariably, the parents in Taylor's stories are referred to as Father and Mother, and thereby elevated and distanced from their children by virtue of their parental roles. Similarly, brothers in more than one story are addressed not by their names but as "Brother." Engagements, weddings, and newspaper bridal announcements show up more often than one might expect, in order to underline marriage as a crossing of the threshold into adulthood, a taking-on of adult roles and responsibilities. (On the occasion of his marriage, indeed, more than one Taylor protagonist is confronted with the solemn nature of the contract he has entered into, with his own insufficient seriousness and maturity, and with the need to understand and accept who and where and what he is.) Unmarried adults are routinely pigeonholed as "bachelors" or "spinsters" in order to emphasize their deviation from social norms. Confronted by the fact of his newly divorced Aunt Grace, the young narrator of Taylor's story "The Scoutmaster" tries to figure out her "function" (he explains: "I would have said my mother's function was Motherhood and my father's, Fatherhood"); as for his Uncle Jake, whom the boy's father has described as a man "forever . . . looking to the past" and thus lacking a purpose in the modern world, the boy discovers at the story's end that Uncle Jake does in fact have a role, if only as a Scoutmaster who passionately lectures his youthful charges about the failure of present-day society to cling to the noble values of the South's bygone "golden days."

If Taylor's stories reveal a fascination with the idea of men (especially well-born men) who flee from home, leaving families and careers behind only to turn up elsewhere with new identities and occupations, it is doubtless because, in a society that places great emphasis on established roles, such imprudent conduct is an utter violation of the proper order of things. By the same token, if there are plenty of betrayals in Taylor's stories—whether of nuptial vows or parental obligations or of the trust between business partners—it is because Taylor is exceedingly alert to the responsibilities that traditionally accompany social roles and to the ways in which people's regard for those responsibilities varies according to time and place.

Occasionally, to be sure, one feels that Taylor, while acknowledging the injustices that were an integral part of the Old South's social order, seems insufficiently repelled by them; and there are times, as well, when he seems overly inclined to associate moral slackness and depravity with the lower classes and to relate high moral values to good breeding. (If he uses the word "gentlemanly" with some frequency, it is largely, one suspects, because it suggests an equation between social privilege and integrity of character.) In his early story "The Fancy Woman," a low-born young lady of easy virtue decides to take advantage of the presumed lechery of a couple of well-born teenage boys, but, not realizing what it means to be brought up a gentleman, is astonished when the younger

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one, perceiving what she's up to, orders her out of his sight. In "Dean of Men," the narrator suggests that his grandfather, an honorable statesman from a fine family who was "betrayed and ruined" by colleagues, might not have experienced this treachery but for the rise of a "new kind of urban politician" that was "low-born." And in "The Old Forest," the narrator draws a careful distinction between the chaste "society girls" whom one was going to marry and the more sexually cooperative non-society girls who (he notes disapprovingly) "made no distinctions among themselves" and "were not interested in . . . distinctions of origin, were not conscious of them, had not been made aware of them by their parents. . . . They did not care who each other's families were or where they had gone to school." He notes sardonically of this democratic-minded lot: "They would have been highly approved of by the present generation of young people." Though in all these stories Taylor puts some distance between himself and his narrators, one's sense is that he essentially approves of their class-conscious patrician sentiments.

Yet for the most part Taylor comes off in his stories not as a participant or partisan but as a perceptive observer of the human condition, acutely aware of the choices and challenges that people face and neither too easy on them nor unsympathetic to them in their inevitable frailty. Despite the fact that he has chosen to write about a particular region and social class, he has rarely seemed in any important sense to be limited by this choice. On the contrary, though few contemporary American fiction writers have focused for so long and with such consistency as Taylor has on a single part of the country, none could be less easily dismissed as a mere regionalist; and though many of his narrators are, like him, well-born Tennesseeans who came of age in the years before World War II, one would hesitate to describe him as an autobiographical writer. For in his best stories Taylor is so good at objectifying the things that are close to him, at establishing a distance between himself and his narrators (many of whom are unreliable), and at recognizing what is meaningful and universal in any given human situation that, despite his attentiveness to the multiplicity of differences in manners, customs, and patterns of thought that divide one household or municipality from another, one cannot imagine the families and hometowns in those stories feeling alien, in any essential way, to any sensitive reader.

This is certainly true of the eighty-six-page title story of Taylor's new collection, *The Oracle at Stoneleigh Court*, in which contrasts between youth and adulthood and pre- and post-World War II sensibilities are on conspicuous display.[1] The narrator, an aging Memphis man who reminisces about events that took place in his life shortly before and after the war, emphasizes at the outset the differences between the two time periods, explaining that when he uses the word "now," "the time I shall have in mind will be the vibrant 'now' of fifty years ago when the Second World War lay before us. . . . I do believe in my heart that this is the period when the young people of my generation imagined ourselves most fully alive."

Immediately prior to the war, the narrator tells us, he was a staff sergeant on temporary duty in Washington, D.C. (and a friend, incidentally, of Phillip Carver, the protagonist of Taylor's 1986 novel, *A Summons to Memphis*). There he dated a bright, ambitious, and "fantastically good-looking" young woman named Lila Montgomery from Tullahoma, Tennessee, and paid occasional visits to his aunt Augusta St. John-Jones, a congressman's widow whose sole deviation from respectability was her interest in spiritualism and who, on her nephew's first visit, determined that he was "not a serious person." Having originally declared himself a conscientious objector—a fact of which, as a

1 *The Oracle at Stoneleigh Court: Stories*, by Peter Taylor; Knopf, 324 pages, $22. The best of Taylor's stories can be found in three paperback collections that are currently in print: *In the Miro District and Other Stories*, *The Collected Stories*, and *The Old Forest and Other Stories*.

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young soldier in Washington, he was so embarrassed that he kept it secret (he says) even from himself—the narrator explains that though he and Lila had different "natures," he was attracted to her because she was "such a natural part of the scene" at a USO dance in Washington, and he felt that, "as a normal young male animal," he *ought* to be attracted to the scene. Speaking of his fellow soldiers, he says, "I longed to feel myself one among *them*." Little surprise, then, that though years later he continues to have strong feelings about Lila—who, following her introduction to Aunt Gussie, established with the old lady a strong and (to the young man) mysterious bond—those feelings nonetheless "seem to remain so persistently shallow."

Midway through the story, the time frame shifts abruptly. Suddenly the war is three years in the past, and the former conscientious objector is now, ironically, a war hero: he is said to have captured a number of Germans at Normandy, though the memory of the event is "forever blotted from my mind." (His inability to remember his act of heroism, which makes him, to his discomfort, an object of universal adulation on the streets of Memphis, has taken the place of his former C.O. status as his great secret from the world.) Having spent some time recuperating in an army hospital, he is living quietly with his parents in Memphis when a fatally ill Aunt Gussie arrives in town, attended by a nurse and by Lila Montgomery, now her close companion, who with her help has obtained a very good job on Capitol Hill. Torn between his hometown girl, Ruthie Ann, and Lila—who has changed in ways that he views as "part and parcel of the post-Second World War world"—he comes to believe that his aunt has put Lila under a spell. His aunt's aim, apparently, is to induce him to marry Lila and to make use of his war-hero popularity and her Washington connections and enterprising spirit to establish himself in a political career. Spooked by this notion, and by the temptation of Lila's magnetism, the young man rushes into marriage with Ruthie Ann, with whom, he tells us, he has lived contentedly these many years.

"The Oracle of Stoneleigh Court" is an unusual story in which what is unsaid matters quite as much as what is said. At the outset, the narrator's predicament, though not fully articulated, is sufficiently clear: for the scion of a leading Memphis family and the grandson of a senator to be a conscientious objector would naturally constitute, in the eyes of everyone concerned, a grave and disgraceful betrayal of family, state, and country alike. Aunt Gussie, at once a repository of old family stories and an intimate of many a Washington power broker, is the very personification of the traditions to which the young man has been made to feel under obligation. Time is significant here: though the story is set in the past, Taylor wants us never to forget that for his protagonist this past was once the present, in which he lived with all of youth's urgency and ignorance of what fate held in store. If in *A Summons to Memphis* Phillip Carver's frequent repetition of the words "of course" points up his own unreliability, in "Oracle" the reiteration of the word "presently" stresses not only the sometime presentness of that long-dead past but also the narrator's inability to make peace with or derive useful lessons from the past, to live fully in the actual present, or to see or chart a meaningful future for himself. In some ways, indeed, the narrator is not unlike Sergeant Alvin York, the World War I hero whom his father viewed with condescension as a country bumpkin whose original C.O. status revealed him to have "little understanding . . . of what the world we live in is like."

No wonder, then, that the narrator feels menaced by Lila, who with her exorbitant political ambitions and her smooth adaptation to postwar life is, as he observes, so different in "nature" from himself. (One is reminded by the reference to Lila's different "nature," incidentally, that in Taylor's lovely story "Promise of Rain," a prudent father named Perkins learns an important lesson in life from his footloose teenage son, Hugh, despite the strong "difference . . . between our two natures"; the narrator in "Oracle," alas, is not made of quite the same stuff.) The

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story's two women are virtual opposites: Lila, who first went to Washington to perform war work, is fascinated by the narrator's D-day exploits; Ruthie Ann is a home girl and a conscientious objector in her heart, with no interest in his war record. Taylor's introduction of Ruthie Ann, "a serious amateur horticulturist," involves a striking image that brings to mind the narrator's own displacement and upending by the war: visiting her in her mother's basement, he discovers that she's pulled tomato plants out by their roots and is hanging them upside down, having heard that "the fruit would continue to ripen without rotting" if she did this; yet the experiment is not working. (Reading this passage, one recalls that the Congressional Hall of Heroes, to which Aunt Gussie significantly took the narrator on his last day in Washington, was also in a basement.)

"The Oracle at Stoneleigh Court" confronts the reader with a question much like that posed by James's "Turn of the Screw": was Lila really under a spell? Or did the spell exist only in the narrator's disoriented mind, as a way of explaining to himself the power that the aunt appeared to exert over him in his guilt and bewilderment, his sense of divorcement from both past and future and from the possibility of carrying off so serious a role as that of war hero? At one point he says of his parents that they have perhaps "reached a time in life when the past and the future seem equally unreal and undistinguishable from each other. Such a time comes eventually for every man and woman. But in this case it may have been only the war because for some sweet-natured people the mere existence of the war itself was sufficient to disorient them forever." Plainly, the narrator is speaking here not only of his parents but of himself; and at story's end, in a passage whose dubious reference to an impossibly serene marriage recalls Ford Madox Ford's novel *The Good Soldier* (whose unreliable narrator has, like Taylor's narrator, blocked out from memory certain aspects of his life), he maintains that since marrying he has lived with Ruthie Ann and her mother in "uneventful seclusion," seeing almost nobody: "We have achieved such peace that thoughts about whatever may have become of Phillip Carver, that other friend who wanted to enlist as a conscientious objector —even such wandering thoughts as that never disturb us here." The narrator has, in short, chosen to stay in his hometown and to become part of a household much like his own except that there is no father and no burdensomely glorious family history—a household in which, cut off by memory from his own past, he has no future to speak of.

"Oracle" is only one of several stories in this book whose narrators' suggestions of magical or supernatural explanations for some turn of events or other serves to raise or underscore questions about their state of mind, their general reliability, and their lives of "uneventful seclusion"—and to help one recognize that an escape into such ways of thinking is the ultimate act of an enfeebled psyche under circumstances to which it is incapable of adapting. In "The Witch of Owl Mountain Springs: An Account of Her Remarkable Powers," for instance, a professor tells of Lizzy Pettigru, a sometime beauty who, after her betrayal by a fiancé and a friend who ran off together and attained movie stardom, became a recluse and a reputed witch. Decades later, the long-retired movie-star couple die in an apparent automobile accident only hours before Lizzy perishes in a fire; the implication is that she used evil powers to cause the crash, then ended her own life. But did she? The narrator himself, after all, seems hardly less of an odd isolato than Lizzy. On the day of the two accidents, he seems to have done an unusual amount of sleeping—at least he *thinks* he was sleeping. But was he? Or is he, rather, a mad arsonist and murderer who, while fully believing in his own fantasy of supernatural doings, is (like the narrator of "Oracle") keeping secrets even from himself?

Neither "The Witch of Owl Mountain Springs" nor, frankly, any of the remaining stories in *Oracle*—some of which are relatively new and others of which are decades old—can quite be counted among Taylor's

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very best work. The style, in some cases, feels a bit strained, self-conscious, even false; in several instances, the endings seem abrupt, almost as if the author had lost interest partway through. Many of these stories are oddly top-heavy, slow and stately in the take-off but surprisingly hasty in the wrap-up; often, expecting a fully fleshed-out climactic confrontation of some kind, one is disappointed to find only a brief critical flare-up followed hard upon by an equally brief, last-paragraph narratorial exegesis. Often one has the feeling at the end that the story's emphasis changed somewhere along the way and that the author has failed to go back and recast the opening appropriately.

Take, for instance, "At the Art Theater," which is for most of its length quite effective. On the day that their engagement has been announced in the local newspaper, Ginnie and Alan attend an Ingmar Bergman film. He, a society boy, isn't thrilled by Bergman; she, a highbrow, isn't thrilled by the splashy newspaper announcement, which was his mother's doing. Leaving the theater, Ginnie mistakenly takes a stranger's arm, and outside, when a friend asks about the "picture"—meaning the newspaper photograph of herself and Alan—she unintentionally irritates Alan by assuming that the woman is referring to the film. In the car, Ginnie and Alan argue. "They were married two months later," Taylor informs us bluntly in the story's last paragraph. But he doesn't impart so much as a word of their argument, for

> [w]hat they said to each other in that quarter hour was of no real significance. How could it be since neither of them had the vaguest conception of why he or she felt so utterly outraged or why he or she felt the necessity to set the other straight on certain points once and for all? Everything they said on the way to Ginnie's house was surely irrelevant to any real quarrel they had between them, and so need not be reported here. But for a time each was insisting periodically to himself or herself that something had gone out of their life. Each had the feeling that he or she had seen something or someone for the last time, that something was over. Each had the transitory feeling of wishing to hold on to something that was lost forever.

All that one can say about this paragraph is that it makes for a very clever ending, though not, alas, a particularly effective one. Yes, it makes a sensitive point about Ginnie and Alan, who are hardly unique in their slowness to recognize and accept the extent of the adaptation and transformation that matrimony demands. Yet for all Taylor's insight into these two characters, one feels almost betrayed at the conclusion of this story; for after what feels like a long, leisurely, and meticulously detailed preparation, Taylor seems to dispatch Ginnie and Alan too quickly with a diagnosis, to reduce them too quickly to a generalization.

The ending of "Cousin Aubrey" (an excerpt from a novel-in-progress) is also less than satisfying. Its narrator, whose life as an undistinguished professor at an obscure college brings to mind the "uneventful seclusion" into which the narrator of "Oracle" has settled, remembers the long-ago journey of the funeral train that carried his grandfather, an eminent senator, home for burial—an event that, in his memory, plainly marks a dividing line between old times and modern times. On the train were many members of his family, which, he says, seemed "to step out of an earlier, simpler, nobler age"; yet there was nothing noble about their condescension toward Aubrey Tucker Bradbury, the senator's illegitimate nephew, who would later disappear without a trace and become an "obsession" of the narrator's. Eventually Aubrey "resurfaces": a visiting lecturer tells the narrator that he has heard about the funeral train from one Colonel A. N. Bradbury-Tucker, "a very urbane and distinguished-seeming person" who described the narrator's family as "provincials" who knew "nothing of the world." The narrator is irked by this view, which is antithetical to his own, but he remains interested in meeting Aubrey someday: "If the long-ago journey on the Senator's funeral train changed all our lives in some degree and if the significance of

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those changes was what I longed to understand, then a meeting with Colonel Bradbury-Tucker—surely the most altered of us all—might facilitate my understanding. Only to look upon the man's countenance might solve mysteries about myself." (For, as Perkins observes in "Promise of Rain," the world can "tell you things about yourself.") Eventually the narrator does see Aubrey's face, but only in a newspaper photograph in which he looks very much like the Senator; the picture gives the narrator an "eerie feeling" that it was Aubrey who died and that his grandfather is in fact still alive.

The story ends, then, with Aubrey never having reappeared in the flesh and with a suggestion of supernatural goings-on that feels almost halfhearted, that many a reader may not feel sufficiently prepared for, and that is curiously lacking in thematic resonance. Does Taylor really mean for us to take seriously the possibility of some kind of body-snatching on his grandfather's part? Or is the suggestion a gesture into which he was forced by the realization that he had no ending? What, in any event, is the point here? That the narrator has so utterly failed to adjust to life in the modern—i.e., post-Grandfather—world, and is so haunted by his family's glamorous past, that he is actually capable of harboring the thought that somewhere, through some magical means, his grandfather still lives? Perhaps the story's chief problem is structural: the opening emphasis on the tradition of vanishing Tennesseeans is not as closely related to the story's conclusion as it might have been; the story might have worked better had Taylor begun with the "smoker" at which the narrator, a standard bearer of his family heritage, learns that his disdained illegitimate cousin is now, in this brave new world, more worldly and better connected than he.

A much more satisfying story is "The Decline and Fall of the Episcopal Church (in the Year of Our Lord 1952)." When, in the mid-1920s, the residents of Blackwell, Tennessee, hire one Sam Flemming to demolish the town's dilapidated and abandoned Episcopal church, he takes home the baptismal font and uses it as a birdbath. The neighbors squirm, and a patient, considerate lawyer named Tom Elkins tries to induce Blackwell's sole remaining Episcopalian, one Mr. Roundtree, to ask Flemming for the font; but Roundtree refuses. Finally, Flemming agrees to sell the font to Elkins, who has it hauled away—with the result that when a new Episcopal church goes up years later, the font (which seems "to have vanished from the face of the earth," not unlike Cousin Aubrey) cannot be recovered and the parishioners must "establish their new church without any relic from the past."

In its focus on a lawyer protagonist and his sense of duty to his community, "The Decline and Fall of the Episcopal Church" strongly recalls Wendell Berry's stories about the fictitious burg of Port William, Kentucky, and the civic-minded attorney Wheeler Catlett. The difference is that in this case the well-meaning lawyer proves to have a rather misguided sense of duty. Elkins's concern is not that a holy object is being desecrated—for the font *isn't* a holy object, strictly speaking, since the church was deconsecrated years ago—but that the Flemmings' use of the font is a cause of local discomfort and scandal. He doesn't want the font treated with respect, he simply wants it out of sight: and as a result he robs the Episcopal Church of a piece of its history, of something to build on—for, as Taylor has suggested in other stories, without a past it is difficult to construct a future. This story is an example of truly superior fiction writing: the rich interplay of believable characters, the ever-ambiguous and delicately shifting sense of where the moral truth of the fictional situation is located, and the witty and perceptive treatment of the resolutely Protestant townsfolks' attitudes toward Episcopal rituals all make this a highly engaging narrative.

Taylor is not only a fiction writer but a playwright of long standing, and so it should not be surprising that *The Oracle at Stoneleigh Court* concludes with a trio of short one-act plays. The most substantial of these is "Missing Person," in which a couple whose son has

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been killed in battle censure themselves—the father, for rejecting the son's plans to declare himself a conscientious objector; the mother, for condemning his refusal to opt for graduate school. Then the boy "returns," appearing to each as the parent's worst nightmare: his father sees him as a penniless hippie on the lam; his mother sees him as a Marine who has committed war crimes, grown rich illicitly, and deserted to avoid court martial. These apparitions help them to accept their son's death.

What can one say about this odd little play? First, that though there is considerable wit and irony on display here, and though Taylor manages to tell us a lot about these three people and their relationships in a very brief space, one can't easily imagine the play being produced: exceedingly brief, and composed in rather formal dialogue, it is perhaps best viewed as a closet drama. Second, that Taylor would seem to have tried his hand at this abbreviated dramatic form in order to see what happens when the upholstery of his fiction is stripped away and some of the major elements of its thematic framework exposed as nakedly as possible, the parents becoming virtual archetypes, the story taking on the lineaments of ritual. Third, that what does happen, here and in his other plays, is that Taylor sells his great themes short: he doesn't give himself a chance to flesh out his characters or to build up adequately to their conflicts, with the result that situations which in his stories assume monumental importance come off in these play as one-dimensional and melodramatic. Ultimately, then, "Missing Person" and its companions are valuable less as independent literary works than as illuminating thematic glosses on Taylor's short stories.

As such, they are of no little interest, for Taylor's stories constitute one of the most substantial literary *oeuvres* of our time. Indeed, it is only when one examines Taylor alongside the very greatest masters of the short story—such as his contemporary and fellow Southerner Flannery O'Connor—that one begins to glimpse the boundaries of his imagined world and finds one's enthrallment with his best stories being somewhat qualified. For though Taylor and O'Connor are often compared, there are instructive differences between the two. She writes under the aspect of eternity, he writes under the aspect of history. She disappears entirely behind her narrative voice, and, as her stories move toward their ends with a tragic and preternatural inevitability, makes one feel that she has tapped into some eternal truth; he often invests his narrators with many of his own personal traits, and, as his stories move toward their ends along the line of narratorial remembrance and reflection, makes one feel that the truths revealed by his stories are the hard-won fruit of human experience. Reading her fiction, one feels that she can see all the way into her characters, black and white, rich and poor, mad and sane, good and evil, is equally captivated by them, tough on them, and sympathetic with them, understanding each in terms of his own particular losses and the state of his soul and valuing each as a unique, ensouled being; Taylor, by contrast, tends to see characters in terms of their relationship to the traditions that he reveres and the social losses that he deplores, and therefore to be interested in and to value some types of people more than others. While O'Connor's work, in short, reflects her belief that (as she once wrote in a letter) "God is as present in the idiot boy as in the genius," the thrust of Taylor's work is that the cherished legacy of the past is more truly alive in some people than in others.

For all these divergences, however, Taylor shares with O'Connor the qualities that make for major literary art. Like her, he is an extraordinary writer of English prose; like her, he is a brilliant student of life; like her, he exhibits an abiding seriousness in regard to the human condition and the function of literature. If she is a stern yet sympathetic inspector of souls, he is a stern yet sympathetic judge of character. In an era of increasing literary frivolousness it is to writers like Peter Taylor that we increasingly turn—and of writers like him it must be said that there have, in our lifetime, been precious few.

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Unholy sonnets
by Mark Jarman

I

Hands folded to construct a church and steeple,
A roof of knuckles, outer walls of skin,
The thumbs as doors, the fingers bent within
To be revealed, wriggling, as "all the people,"
All eight of them, enmeshed, caught by surprise,
Turned upward blushing in the sudden light,
The nails like welders' masks, the fit so tight
Among them you can hear their half-choked cries
To be released, to be pried from this mess
They're soldered into somehow—they don't know.
But stuck now they are willing to confess,
If that will ease your grip and let them go,
Confess the terror they cannot withstand
Is being locked inside another hand.

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II

After the praying, after the hymn-singing,
After the sermon's trenchant commentary
On the world's ills, which make ours secondary,
After communion, after the hand-wringing,
And after peace descends upon us, bringing
Our eyes up to regard the sanctuary
And how the light swords through it, and how, scary
In their sheer numbers, motes of dust ride, clinging—
There is, as doctors say about some pain,
Discomfort knowing that despite your prayers,
Your listening and rejoicing, your small part
In this communal stab at coming clean,
There is one stubborn remnant of your cares
Intact. There is still murder in your heart.

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III

Two forces rule the universe of breath
And one is gravity and one is light.
And does their jurisdiction include death?
Does nothingness exist in its own right?
It's hard to say, lying awake at night,
Full of an inner weight, a glaring dread,
And feeling that Simone Weil must be right.
Two forces rule the universe, she said,
And they are light and gravity. And dead,
She knows, as you and I do not, if death
Is also ruled or if it rules instead,
And if it matters, after your last breath.
But she said truth was on the side of death
And thought God's grace filled emptiness, like breath.

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IV

Time to admit my altar is a desk.
Time to confess the cross I bear a pen.
My soul, a little like a compact disc,
Slides into place, a laser plays upon
Its surface, and a sentimental mist,
Freaked with the colors of church window glass,
Rides down a shaft of light that smells of must
As music adds a layer of high gloss.
Time to say plainly when I am alone
And waiting for the coming of the ghost
Whose flame-tongue like a blow torch, sharp and lean,
Writes things that no one ever could have guessed,
I give in to my habit and my vice
And speak as soon as I can find a voice.

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Music

Leon Botstein attempts to save music

by Samuel Lipman

By rights, the just concluding musical season should have been the year of the New York Philharmonic. Its 150th-anniversary celebration, following hard on the heels of its selection of the highly respected German conductor Kurt Masur as music director, should have provided audiences with everything needed to whet their musical appetite and restore interest to what some have been calling a dying art.

But the Philharmonic, like the musical public, failed to count on the sudden irruption into New York musical life of Leon Botstein, a fortyish, hitherto almost unknown conductor. Trained as an academic at Harvard, Mr. Botstein first achieved fame when, at the age of twenty-four, he was appointed president of Franconia College, a tiny, exceedingly trendy liberal-arts college tucked away in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. In 1975, Mr. Botstein moved on to become the president of Bard College, a somewhat larger, exceedingly trendy liberal-arts college in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Among Mr. Botstein's initiatives at Bard was the creation of an Alger Hiss chair in social history and the humanities. Recently, he engaged the retiring New York State Controller Edward Reagan to found an institute for the study of economic policy.

Drawing on his study of Central European culture, Mr. Botstein has written on music for *The New Republic*, *The Journal of Modern History*, *19th-Century Music*, and *The Musical Quarterly*. An English translation of his 1991 book, *Judentum und Modernität*, will be published by Yale University Press in 1994, and still another book, *Music and Its Public: Habits of Listening and the Crisis of Musical Modernism in Vienna, 1870-1914*, is forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press. Last month, he assumed the editorship of *The Musical Quarterly*, America's venerable —and dull—musicological journal. It should be added, too, that he appears often on television talk shows as a spokesman for the values of liberal-arts education and against the attempts of those whom he sees as conservatives to have a hand in influencing such education.

But along with administrative accomplishments and multifarious writing activities, Mr. Botstein has also harbored ambitions as a performing musician. As his concert biography tells us, he studied violin and viola, won a conducting competition at the University of Chicago, and became the assistant conductor of the university orchestras of Chicago and Harvard. In the 1970s, he was principal conductor of the White Mountain Festival in New Hampshire, and from 1975 to 1992 he appeared with the Hudson Valley Philharmonic as principal guest conductor and conductor of its Chamber Orchestra. Yet it is a measure of his status in the musical world during the 1980s that his name is omitted from the the 2,115 pages of Nicolas Slonimsky's encyclopedic Eighth Edition of *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* (1991).

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By 1990, however, Mr. Botstein was ready to make his move into the big time. He founded, as artistic director, the two-week Bard Music Festival, an annual event that fixes upon "explorations" in words and notes of the work of one great composer and his cultural milieu, including his lesser-known colleagues. ("Exploration" is now an academic buzz word frequently used to avoid any suggestion that one might go to a concert to enjoy the music.) In 1990, the composer chosen for "exploration" was Brahms; in 1991, Mendelssohn; and in 1992, Richard Strauss. For the copy- and idea-starved New York musical press, including *The New York Times*, all this proved to be catnip.

Here was a heaven-sent chance for the press to write about something other than the same old sounds of the same old pieces; here—with my own glosses in parentheses—was a chance to speculate on whether all the works of a composer, of even a great composer, are equally good (they are not); on whether a great composer was greater than his lesser colleagues (he was); on whether listening to music in public is still a viable activity (it is). In 1992, for example, the Bard Festival, in "exploring" Strauss, provided innumerable chances for critics to write about whether Strauss was a Nazi (he was not), and on whether his works should, or can, be listened to in the light of his politics (some should, some shouldn't). And because Mr. Botstein thoughtfully supplied his own words and those of his assistants to explicate these hardly recondite questions, music critics actually had a chance to do what it seems these days they actually do best: to write about words rather than music.

Mr. Botstein thus has become a founding father of what is now called thematic programming. It is a dubious concept, whose basic premise has been formulated nicely by the *Times*'s chief critic, Edward Rothstein: "If audiences won't come to hear music, perhaps they will come to think about it."

Mr. Botstein's latest grab for the musical brass ring has been his assumption this past season of the music directorship of the American Symphony Orchestra, a fractious group of free-lance players who have for many years given several concerts annually in Carnegie Hall. The orchestra was founded in 1962 by Leopold Stokowski (with $50,000 of his own money!), who stayed with the orchestra until his ninetieth birthday in 1972. During the Stokowski years, the orchestra played much new music, including the reconstructed version of Charles Ives's Fourth Symphony. Although the ASO never became a true second orchestra in New York—the conductor's long-cherished dream—it did generate, under Stokowski's direction, a good deal of musical excitement. But in the past two decades the orchestra has had many music directors, none of them able to bring either high playing standards or a cohesive performance personality to the group. The orchestra has always seemed to be looking for two angels, one musical and the other financial; perhaps the ideal solution would be one angel wearing, so to speak, two hats.

It might seem that Mr. Botstein is just the right man for the job; I do not know how many hats he can wear, but he certainly seems to have many heads on which to wear them. Mr. Botstein has made abundantly clear his attitude toward the traditional orchestra concert. In a January interview with Heidi Waleson in *The Wall Street Journal*, he calls such a concert

> a kind of distilled 19th-century ritual, which has no explanation. You go in, there's an overture, a concerto, a symphony. Nobody says anything . . . It's like walking into somebody's church: People begin to pray, you have the general idea that there's a God there, you know it has a beginning, a middle and an end, but you have no idea what's going on, and nobody is there to help you.

But rejoice, o ye lovers of sweet sounds, and lift up your ears, o ye lovers of melody and harmony! Leon Botstein is here to help you listen, to give you the words that you, unsophisticated albeit well-meaning, need to unlock the mysteries (and what you had thought were the *longueurs*) of music. It

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must be said that Mr. Botstein is hardly interested in the reactionary, old-fogey audience that thinks it already knows what goes on in a concert or even (heaven forfend) might know how to behave in church. Mr. Botstein is interested in the greatest prize of all: the young, those blessed creatures with an abundance of energy and plenty of money jingling in their pockets. It is the elusive young that he proposes to bring firmly into the grasp of Euterpe.

So much is perfectly clear from Mr. Botstein's concert biography: "Mr. Botstein has taken on the challenge of restructuring orchestral concert programs and attempting to expand the audience of [for?] classical music in New York City." In a Sunday column in the "Arts & Leisure" section of *The New York Times* for January 10 of this year, Alex Ross, a recent Harvard graduate and the newest *Times* critic, commented on this latest (and most highly publicized) attempt to bring a new generation into the concert hall. Calling his column "Can Botstein Convince the Young?", Mr. Ross writes:

> Everyone murmurs religiously these days that classical music must find new, young listeners. Influenced, perhaps, by the 20-something generation's reputation for superficiality, some recommend a glossy repackaging of tradition, a make-over. They are wrong. This coveted young audience resists classical music precisely because it seems remote, shrouded, wrapped up in itself . . . Mr. Botstein's concept has potential to convince younger listeners that classical music is not some cobwebbed ghost ship, lost in time.

Mr. Botstein himself makes clear his concern with the young. Writing in the Winter 1993 issue of *Culturefront*—a publication of the New York Council for the Humanities, on the editorial board of which sits Mr. Botstein—he says:

> The facts of twentieth-century musical life make it unlikely that a new audience will spontaneously take the place of the older generation. Few contemporaries of Bill Clinton and Al Gore ever played a classical musical instrument, sang in secular choirs, or can read music. But they all listen to CDs. They want to listen, and they realize that the emotional realities of adulthood are making them seek a musical experience far different from the musical experience they relished during their adolescence and college years.

Here, according to Alex Ross, is how Mr. Botstein has been implementing his reassuring words about our national cultural leadership at the American Symphony Orchestra concerts:

> The first concert . . . gathered music of Europeans who lived in America during World War II (Martinu, Korngold, Hindemith, Weill); the second . . . examined the influence of surrealism on composers (Poulenc, Cage, Varèse, Koechlin); the third . . . linked American modernist painters with compositional contemporaries (Cowell, Copland, Feldman, Sessions and others).

Mr. Botstein's conception is thus to fashion (in Mr. Ross's words) "programs on interdisciplinary themes, largely devoid of familiar music." The point of the "concert" becomes not the music itself but its linkage with, and subordination to, non-musical subjects: refugeedom, the surrealism of Magritte, the modernist painting of Frank Stella, Mark Rothko, and Sol LeWitt, and the writing of Pound, Eliot, Stein, Joyce, and others. The linkage, of course, is to be provided by lectures and program notes from Mr. Botstein, who has been called, by both the *Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, a "polymath."

But concerts, *pace* Mr. Botstein, are still about listening to music. I had never had the chance to hear Mr. Botstein conduct, and I eagerly seized the opportunity to remedy this lack by attending a concert by the American Symphony Orchestra in late February. Entitled "Unjust Obscurity?", the program was in the "Great Performers" series at Avery Fisher Hall. I regret that I missed Mr. Bot-

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stein's pre-concert discussion, which had been scheduled for 6:15. My sources of information about the concert were the Fisher Hall box office and the programming department of WNCN-FM (WNCN's interest in the event involved collecting ballots from the audience to determine which of the four works it found unjustly obscure). Neither source told me about the pre-concert discussion, which also went unmentioned in the Lincoln Center Concert Calendar. Both my sources, however, reminded me that the concert was to begin at 7:25—another of Mr. Botstein's radical innovations.

I don't think there can be much doubt that Mr. Botstein's four composers on this particular night were indeed obscure. The first work was the 1859 Overture from the Music to Shakespeare's *King Lear* by the Russian nationalist Mili Balakirev (1837-1910). The second was the 1934 Concerto in E flat for Piano Left Hand and Orchestra by the Austrian semi-modernist Franz Schmidt (1874-1939); after the intermission, we heard the 1897 symphonic poem *La Mort de Tintagiles*, by the German-Alsatian-American Charles Martin Loeffler (1861-1935); the final work was the uncompleted 1907 Symphony no. 1 of the Polish nationalist Karol Szymanowski. Despite their undoubted obscurity, all these works are now available on CD.

Balakirev is now known, if at all, for his two symphonies and the Oriental fantasy *Islamey*, which last work appears from time to time on the recital programs of *very* virtuoso pianists. Schmidt is now, I believe, totally forgotten. Loeffler is best known for his sensuously refined orchestral work *A Pagan Poem*, a particular specialty of Leopold Stokowski,[1] and for some isolated works of chamber music. The greatly gifted Szymanowski is now known mostly for his two very beautiful violin concertos and for several violin showpieces, including the evocative "Fountain of Arethusa."

Since this whole discussion centers on obscurity, I should mention that I am familiar with the symphonies of Balakirev, and that I once worked very seriously at learning the technically treacherous *Islamey*. I have never heard a work of Schmidt's. I am familiar with both the *Pagan Poem* and Mr. Botstein's choice, *La Mort de Tintagiles*,[2] as well as with some of Loeffler's chamber music. While I had never heard the Symphony no. 1 of Szymanowski, I am otherwise quite familiar with his music, in particular with his opera *King Roger*, his chorale work *Stabat Mater*, his two string quartets, and his piano mazurkas, several of which I have played; I know best his *Symphonie concertante* for piano and orchestra, also known as his Symphony no. 4, which I have performed both with the Polish conductor Jerzy Semkow and with my friend and colleague, the American conductor Gerard Schwarz.

I must repeat that I missed, and regret missing, the pre-concert discussion, a feature of Mr. Botstein's activities which I am well aware he considers integral to his musical mission. But I do have his extended program notes—six 8 1/2 by 11 inch pages of comment on the composers and their works, prefaced by a disquisition on obscurity. In the disquisition, Mr. Botstein inveighs against what he calls the tyranny on our concert stages of the 175 greatest musical works in the repertory. Of the works that he programmed on this night, he wrote:

> We are performing works that are finely crafted and inspired in their own right, written by outstanding composers who used music to express ideas with power, intensity, authenticity and artistic and emotional commitment: music by leading figures from the musical past. The works, in formal terms, are as good in every sense as most of the paintings in our museums and works of literature in print from the past, with perhaps the exception of the 175 most valued examples. That a single work is not the

1 Stokowski's magnificent performance of this work, conducting "His Symphony Orchestra," was available for many years on an Angel-Seraphim LP, S-60080. It doubtless will soon reappear on CD.

2 *La Mort de Tintagiles* is available on a splendid recording conducted by John Nelson with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra (New World CD 332-2).

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> Beethoven *Fifth*, the Dvořák *'Cello Concerto*, Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*, Debussy's *La Mer* or Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* ought not to disqualify it from being listened to, even more than once.

I suppose one should pass by Mr. Botstein's suggestion, doubtless unintended, that there are also somewhere lists of the "175 most valued examples" of paintings and works of literature.[3] I am less willing to pass by his lukewarm praise for the works he has himself chosen, finding them "as good in every sense as most of the paintings in our museums and works of literature in print from the past." Since when is "as good as" a recommendation for the existence of art on a high level? And what about his own strange list of real masterpieces, which includes, as it were, in one bin, a Beethoven symphony, the Dvořák Cello Concerto, the Debussy *La Mer*, and the Gershwin *Rhapsody in Blue*? Is all this merely an example of the catholicity of Mr. Botstein's musical taste? Or has he any musical taste with which to be catholic?

The sad fact is that Mr. Botstein, in attempting to make a case for his obscure composers and their works, didn't really choose very well. The Balakirev music for *King Lear* seemed thoroughly empty, bombastic, and even crude; there can be no doubt that there is better music of Balakirev around waiting for resurrection (including the symphonic poem *Tamar*, which my misinformant at WNCN told me would be on the program). I found very little to admire in the Schmidt concerto; it seemed stylistically at sixes and sevens, a bunch of notes in search of an integrated composition to contain them, always searching for a mood that could be, but never was, developed. I feel rather differently about the Loeffler, which is indeed a fine piece, anticipating the first part, written several years later, of Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder*; unfortunately, the Loeffler is cursed with a weak and musically meaningless ending. The Szymanowski, left uncompleted by the composer, is certainly the least attractive of any Szymanowski I have ever heard. Like the Balakirev, it is bombastic. It also seemed structureless and wandering.

I did actually hear a bit of Mr. Botstein's commentary, for he favored us with a few remarks just after intermission. *King Lear*, he explained, was Balakirev's attempt to describe the mood of the play. The Schmidt was an example of the Viennese tendency to write at heavenly length and to never let a good idea go. The Loeffler was program music, a genre justified by Dvořák, who actually wanted *his* listeners to read the words of his programs as they listened to his music; we were also treated to a demonstration of the sound of the hybrid viola d'amore, the somewhat recessive solo instrument called for in the piece. The Szymanowski reminded Mr. Botstein of the Strauss tone poems; to show that he is not entirely without humor, Mr. Botstein told us that we know the Szymanowski is unfinished because the composer called what we know as the second (and final) movement of the symphony the third movement.

I have purposefully left the worst for last. I am, of course, referring to the performances. The American Symphony Orchestra is not by any stretch of the imagination a first-class orchestra. It does have gifted players in it, but it plays together too rarely, and, in par-

3 I find Mr. Botstein's fastening upon "175 most valued examples" of great music somewhat idiosyncratic. After all, Haydn wrote 104 symphonies; Mozart 40 symphonies, 27 piano concertos, and 5 violin concertos; Beethoven wrote 9 symphonies and 8 works for soloist and orchestra; Schubert 9 symphonies; Schumann 4 symphonies; Mendelssohn 4 great symphonies; Brahms 4 symphonies and 4 concertos; Dvořák 9 symphonies; Bruckner 9 symphonies; Tchaikovsky 6 symphonies, 3 renowned concertos, and 3 great ballets; Mahler 9 symphonies; Shostakovich 15 symphonies and at least 6 concertos; Prokofiev 7 symphonies and at least 8 concertos, and Bartók 7 concertos. These more than 300 works by the greatest masters do not include well-known overtures, Strauss tone poems, the orchestral works of Debussy and Ravel—or Bach. There is indeed a lot of great music out there without making a purposeful search for the obscure just to fill out the repertory.

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ticular, lacks—and has lacked for many years—the kind of conductorial leadership that makes fine musicians play beautifully. To put it simply, Mr. Botstein is not much of a leader at all. To begin with, he is what is called in the trade a one-armed conductor, beating time metronomically with his right hand and for the most part leaving his left hand to hang at his side. From what I could see, and I sat in Row L in the center of the parterre, the sole duties of Mr. Botstein's left hand were on rare occasions to mimic the time beating of the right hand, and for the rest, to turn the pages of the orchestral score. It must also be said that the eminent pianist Leon Fleisher, the soloist in the Schmidt, played in a messy and rough fashion, thereby contributing his mite to the failure of the work. In contrast, I thoroughly enjoyed Janet Hill's performance of the viola d'amore solo in the Loeffler.

Doubtless there is today too much emphasis placed by the marketeers of music, and therefore by the audience, on the star-value of a very few performers, among whom are to be found conductors. Indeed, it is now the fashion to talk about just how much money conductors make from their chores, and about just how little attention they pay to the orchestras they conduct. There is justice in some of these complaints: many conductors *are* overpaid, and many conductors—even such accomplished and knowledgeable musicians as Erich Leinsdorf—devote scandalously little time to making the orchestras they conduct better than they found them to be at the first rehearsal.

But whatever the problems with any individual conductor, the fact remains that it is precisely his function to shape the sound of the performance. What the conductor does is vastly more than beat time and correct wrong notes, rhythms, and out-of-tune playing, though these days most who occupy the podium seem to neglect even these basic matters. The chief thing the conductor does is shape phrases by communicating to the musicians in great detail how loud to play each note, what tone-quality to use, and what the proper balance is between each instrument and each choir of instruments.

There are a myriad such details, and only a precious few can be communicated in words. The rest—and "the rest" is most of the conductor's art—is conveyed by the conductor's beat and by the expressive, though subtle, use of his body. Orchestras with great traditions can exist—at least for a time—at a high level of performance with a minimum of direction from the conductor; but that is only because great orchestras have institutional memories, memories of the great works they have played under the direction of great leaders. An orchestra such as the Berlin Philharmonic has a great reservoir of this institutional memory—but even the Berlin has keenly felt the loss of its leader, Herbert von Karajan. In the same way, but almost a half-century ago, the Boston Symphony Orchestra was never able to retain the greatness it had achieved as an ensemble after the departure of Serge Koussevitzky.

Leon Botstein's musical contribution to the concert I heard at the end of February was, as best as I could see and hear, no contribution at all. As for his program notes, where I had expected pedantry, I found only vacuity; the words seemed little more than idle gleanings from reference works. In the end, their literary relation to the music they were describing was no closer than Mr. Botstein's musical relation to the works he was conducting.

Curiously, amidst all the high hopes expressed in the press for the success of Mr. Botstein's many enterprises, there has been a clear critical verdict on his performance: he doesn't conduct very well, and his literary contribution isn't very good either. And yet the critical optimism, at least so far, remains high. As a cultural phenomenon, it seems yet another case—reminiscent of the multimedia and multicultural craze of the past two decades—of zero being added to zero and somehow being made to equal one. That's bad mathematics, and it makes for bad art as well.

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Art

From Tung Ch'i-ch'ang's China to David Ross's Manhattan

by Jed Perl

"The Century of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang," an exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art last fall and winter, was about a painter and calligrapher who was an imperial official in the last years of the Ming dynasty, some four centuries ago.[1] The 1993 Whitney Biennial, up until June 13, is about more than eighty artists who are working right now.[2] The odd thing is that the artists who are exhibiting at the Whitney are engaged in activities that I can barely make heads or tails of, while Tung Ch'i-ch'ang's concerns are ones that make perfect sense to me. It is not that I am unfamiliar with the artists and the work that is in the Biennial this year; much of what David Ross, the director of the Whitney, and Elisabeth Sussman, the curator in charge of the show, have seen fit to include has already been exhibited in New York City's commercial galleries. And it is not that I would presume to understand a great deal about Tung Ch'i-ch'ang and his world; many civilizations are easier for us to know than Ming China. Yet Tung is an artist whose concerns strike me with some urgency, and this is not something that I can say about a single artist in the 1993 Biennial. Tung was working in the first decades of the seventeenth century in a landscape tradition that was at that time already at least five or six hundred years old, and he confronts the uses of the past (and all the perplexities that are involved in assimilating a tradition and carrying it forward) with a forthrightness that I know from the artists who interest me today. The Biennial, by contrast, is a show of artists for whom the preoccupations of earlier artists can only have a negative significance. Most of the artists involved in the Biennial are ideologically opposed to anything that earlier artists have cared about (and this includes the expressive use of color and shape). The 1993 Biennial is a show that has no visual impact whatsoever, and in this negative sense it can be said to succeed perfectly in what it has set out to do.

Ross and Sussman are not quite willing to admit that they are indifferent to what they call "visual pleasure" (though Ross's sweeping allusion to "cynical formalism" makes this pretty clear). The words that stand out in highest relief in their catalogue essays are

1 "The Century of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang" was on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from October 23, 1992, through January 10, 1993. The show was organized by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, and was seen there from April 19 through June 14, 1992. It then traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California (July 19-September 20, 1992). A two-volume catalogue, edited by Wai-kam Ho, has been published by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art/University of Washington Press (Vol. 1, 465 pages; Vol. 2, 603 pages; $150 the set; $75 paper).

2 The 1993 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, opened on February 24. A catalogue of the show, edited by Elisabeth Sussman, has been published by the Whitney/Harry N. Abrams (286 pages, $39.95 paper).

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ones such as "conflict" and "contest." These words do not refer to the conflict or contest that the artist might engage in with him- or herself or with other art. They refer to the conflicts and contests that Ross and Sussman believe that artists must engage in with social forces outside the museum, or to the part that artists take in conflicts and contests between various factions in the world beyond the museum. Ross puts it this way: "Artists insist: know thyself . . . by any means necessary! They define and defy the boundaries that exclude, explore the delimiting zones of the geopolitical, the psychosocial, and the body's politic." This show is supposed to be about the crossing of boundaries and zones, yet it is just about the most one-dimensional exhibition that I have ever seen. The subject matter has a good deal to do with viewpoints. Blacks look at whites looking at blacks. Women look at women and at men and at how men regard women. Latinos and Native Americans look at White America. Gays contemplate the closet. Yet the results of all this looking are static. This is a Biennial (and this could be a first) in which there is not a single work that provokes a visitor to look closely or deeply. There isn't a single work that I wanted to walk around, look up and down, look across, look into. Tung Ch'i-ch'ang said of the artist, "A painter must learn first from the ancient masters, then from nature, and finally from his own mind." I would not think to quote this statement, which strikes me as just about the most obvious thing in the world, except that a person walking in front of the Whitney with these words printed on a sandwich board would no doubt be regarded by David Ross as a troublemaker.

Tung Ch'i-ch'ang was a member of a cultural elite; so is David Ross. Tung (his dates are 1555-1636) came from a not immensely distinguished family, excelled in the examinations that were the avenue to social and political power in Ming China, and served in various high positions. He had not painted in his youth and does not seem to have been regarded as in any way a natural, but he took as his teachers his friends, who were the great connoisseurs of his day, and along the way he built his own significant collection of ancient works of art. David Ross graduated from Syracuse University, and before becoming director of the Whitney he held various curatorial and directorial positions (often with a focus on video art) at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, the Long Beach Museum in Long Beach, California, the University Art Museum in Berkeley, and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Tung was well acquainted with the political intricacies of Ming China, and had on more than one occasion to plot a retreat from public life in order to weather reversals in his career. Ross is no stranger to the high-stakes politics that dominates our arts institutions today. Tung is one of the Oriental scholar-painters who have fascinated Westerners for the past hundred years. His situation as part of an elite-within-an-elite seems to prefigure the situation of the avant-garde artist in the modern world. Surely there is something to our sense that the seventeenth-century artist contemplating the landscape painting of the twelfth century is an early believer in what we call (for lack of a better term) art-for-art's-sake. David Ross does not believe in art-for-art's-sake, and given that this is what most of the best art has been for several hundred years now, it is no wonder that the very cultural elite through which Ross has made his rise looks to him like a hollow shell. What many of us regard as the trappings of culture—the buildings and boards and media events—are, so far as David Ross is concerned, all there is. He can't look inside the culture he is hired to uphold since he regards it as empty. No wonder he wants to turn things inside out.

The best of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang's landscape paintings, which date from the third decade of the seventeenth century, suggest the roughness of nature recollected in tranquility. The paintings are done with broad and sometimes coarse strokes of the brush, yet the effect that they have on a viewer is delicate and refined. It takes only the most cursory knowledge of Chinese art to under-

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stand that Tung is creating variations on age-old themes. In his long scrolls and sets of album leaves he combines and recombines a repertory of subjects that go back to the T'ang, Sung, and Yüan dynasties: the scholar's journey through beautiful countryside, the rustic retreat among the wild mountains, the changes that come with the seasons. Few details in these paintings strike one as referring to specific places; but Tung has a passionate, immediate, specific relationship with the language of Chinese landscape art —with its tall peaks and gnarled trees and twisting rivers and snakelike clouds, its paths and bridges and pavilions and tiny figures. The imagery may be conventional but Tung treats it in a personal and emotionally charged way. Going through the show of Tung's work, I felt that I was in the presence not of an artist who was concerned to have original insights but of an artist who kept replaying the old insights until the very act of replaying them turned out to be his original insight. Tung on nature is a little like Watteau on love.

At the Metropolitan Museum, an effort was made to connect Tung's work with more recent concerns. Among the public programs was a conversation between Brice Marden, who has in recent years taken an interest in Chinese calligraphy, and Wen Fong, who is the consultive chairman of the Department of Asian Art at the Met. In an interview, Marden spoke of Tung's landscapes in terms of a "calligraphy in which every mark is felt. It's not cornball emotion. It's real, direct transmission of the artist into the work, which is a really important idea. It separates artists, expressionists from formalists. I'm an expressionist." Some of what Marden says gets a little airy. Ten years ago, he explains, "I would have said I was a Western artist. Now it's all breaking down globally, we're going back and forth. It's magic, alchemy." Yet Marden's interest in Tung is the most natural thing in the world: a contemporary artist feeling enthusiastic about the work of a great artist of the past. That we can care about the paintings and calligraphy of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, who worked long ago in a culture not very much like our own, puts a very un-David Rossish spin on the idea of multiculturalism.

Ross writes about stretching us and challenging us, and yet the first thing that confronts a visitor to the 1993 Whitney Biennial, Charles Ray's oversized toy fire engine parked on the curb in front of the museum, is a familiar object presented in a nonutilitarian form that is familiar to anybody who knows of Pop Art. Inside the show, there is hardly a material or an image that isn't familiar. And to the extent that ordinary things are transformed, it is through a Surrealist process that is by now the province not so much of art as of the ad agencies. When I think of this Biennial, I recall industrial materials, printed texts, a lot of kitsch. And there you have it. No imagination has gone to work to transform these materials. In Mark Rappaport's video *Rock Hudson's Home Movies*, clips from the old Hudson/Doris Day movies are shown, with the idea that Hudson's by now widely publicized homosexuality will give them a new meaning. What this new meaning turns out to consist of is the thought that the Rock Hudson/Doris Day pictures are arch and sexless and unreal—that to the extent that they're amusing it's because the whole thing is a charade. True enough, but isn't that what anybody even moderately sophisticated thought about them when they first appeared?

Most of the work in this show defies description. I mean this literally, for description implies reaction—one describes what one has seen—and the most salient fact about the art in the Biennial is that it is so heedless of the needs of the eye that it is impossible to see it. To describe what a painting by Sue Williams looks like is in itself to give a false visual substance to these paint-on-canvas broadsides about sexism. The 1993 Biennial takes us no farther than our TV set does. And I can have more fun and learn more about the culture if I spend a weekday afternoon channel surfing with the TV. Perhaps the Whitney means to present familiar materials in an unfamiliar way, but that presupposes a level of artistry that no artist in

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the Whitney can begin to approach. It's that kind of artistry that's operative in "The Century of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang." It's an artistry that can make familiar motifs feel unfamiliar and then turn that unfamiliarity into a new kind of familiarity. (If you don't catch my meaning, you just might be the kind of person who's going to get suckered by the 1993 Biennial.)

At the Metropolitan the Tung Ch'i-ch'ang exhibition was divided into two parts, with the first mostly containing Tung's work and the second focusing on his huge influence on his contemporaries and on later artists. The show, which presented an artist and his world and delved into complex questions of inspiration and imitation, had to leave most of us feeling that we were in a little over our heads. Perhaps it was in recognition of this that some of the organizers, at least through the press materials, suggested that Tung's relation to the Chinese tradition could be compared in its revolutionary implications to Picasso and Braque's invention of Cubism. Tung's desire to reinterpret in an abstract manner pictorial conventions that were originally developed to express naturalistic experience certainly gives some weight to this reading. Yet Tung's work makes an immediate impression that is so forceful that there is probably no need for the analogy to Cubism. Tung composes with a thrilling, peremptory ease. In the works of the 1620s and 1630s he is an artist shuffling landscape emblems and coming up with magical images. The same size of album leaf (somewhere around a foot high) can be used to evoke the coziness of a mountain hideaway or a journey across great distances. The suites of album leaves are meant to suggest the range of what the artist can do (and they do exactly that). Tung squeezes trees and mountains together, twists them a bit, or tosses them across the surface. One understands the roughness of the brushwork as the hand's way of keeping up with the mind.

The work of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang isn't good because it's relevant, but when I think of Tung as having no reason for painting be-

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yond his own edification and entertainment and that of a few of his friends—well, I think of today. The contemporary artists who count are also basically on their own: they work for themselves, for a few fellow artists, and for a minuscule public that scarcely extends beyond their friends. Even for the best-known among our serious artists—figures such as R. B. Kitaj or the late Joan Mitchell—art is not something that is fueled by the needs and responses of a wide public. Today's serious artists are like the scholar-painters of China in that they must find sustenance within. There's no larger culture to which one can turn in order to clear the air. How to distinguish manner from mannerism, deference from dependence can become harrowing questions, because one must find both the questions and the answers on one's own. The contemporary artist is a closet mandarin.

Some visitors, contemplating the Whitney's efforts to break down the boundaries between groups and zones, might imagine that David Ross and Elisabeth Sussman, however misguided, have the best interests of all artists in mind. Do they not, after all, want to get the mandarins out of the closets? To bring art and society together will sound wonderful to some, and even people who find the work in the 1993 Biennial anything but wonderful may be inclined to give the organizers the benefit of the doubt. (That was the reaction of Roberta Smith in her review in the *Times*.) David Ross explains the predominance in this Biennial of art that takes its imagery and ideas from popular culture as an extension of the museum's traditional obligation to serve the larger society. Roberta Smith hopes that further Biennials (this is the first over which Ross has had total control) will highlight what she calls "other esthetic approaches"—I assume she means things like painting. But is what we're getting at the Whitney an aesthetic approach at all? And does society benefit from going to an art museum to see much of the same material that it sees outside of the museum? This is a show without passion. Certainly there is no passion for color, line, space. And as surely there is nothing like a passionate desire to correct the ills of a troubled society, for no one who is determined to take a meaningful part in political or social change could possibly imagine that the place to do so is in the galleries of a museum on Madison Avenue.

Perhaps the most honest statement in the Whitney catalogue comes from Lisa Phillips. "Today," Phillips writes, "everybody's talking about gender, identity, and power the way they talked about the grid in the late sixties and early seventies." This is an attempt to calm down those who feel that things have gone too far (among them Lisa Phillips, a Whitney curator whose role in the Biennial decision-making process has been downgraded and who probably looks back nostalgically on the good old days of Neoexpressionism). The gist of the Phillips statement is that we're always talking about something, and the something is always changing, so why be upset? But it is the idiotic idea that everything is always changing that is upsetting to some of us. One of the criticisms made against those who have criticized Biennials past is that they always say the same things. But what of the thought that some things that were wrong are still wrong (or have gotten worse)? The answer to Phillips's bland view of the Zeitgeist is that for some of us there are things in art that never change. This is not necessarily a conservative view. It could be a radical view, in that it offers artists a way out of the sociopolitical impasse to which David Ross believes art has come. The artist who goes through the 1993 Whitney Biennial and feels no kinship with anything on display need not feel alone. This artist will easily find kindred spirits among his or her contemporaries, and then there are all the kindred spirits of the past, generations and generations of them, all the artists whose work tells us that they were thinking about the same things that artists are thinking about today. After all, we are separated from the century of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang by fewer centuries than he was separated from the T'ang and Sung painters who were his masters.

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Exhibition notes

"Susan Rothenberg: Paintings & Drawings,"
at the Hirshhorn Museum &
Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.
February 10—May 9, 1993

What happens when, over time, the critical apparatus attached to a living artist's work falls away, leaving his audience to confront the work plain? The question first occurred to me some fifteen years ago, at the Kenneth Noland retrospective at the "old" Guggenheim Museum. At that exhibition, I looked at Noland's paintings and, with the cadences of formalist criticism beating less urgently in my ears, they appeared thin and bloodless, far less substantial than I had previously thought.

Something similar happened to me at the current Susan Rothenberg retrospective. This show, comprising more than forty paintings and some thirty drawings, confirmed my uneasy suspicion that Rothenberg, too, is not the artist I had thought her to be. Early on I saw her as a seminal figure in contemporary painting. Now I see her as an artist who, like one of her signature horses, came out of the gate at a gallop, but who soon flagged, unable to go the distance.

When Rothenberg's work first appeared in the late 1970s, most famously in the Whitney Museum's "New Image Painting" show of 1978-79, it was widely considered to have given painting a new energy and direction. Her silhouettes of horses, situated on fields of feverishly worked brushstrokes, reintroduced recognizable images to painting when abstraction was still the dominant orthodoxy. At the same time, Rothenberg's work kept faith with that orthodoxy in its formal simplicity and overall organization.

Those early horse paintings certainly did have power, and still do. Their iconic directness, their easy elisions between taut drawing and free brushwork, their varied approaches to the image of the horse itself—all combine to considerable emotional effect. But what about the more recent work? Sad to say, it seems less the creation of an inspired innovator blazing her way toward the True Path than that of yet another semi-abstract painter groping her way through the darkness.

After 1983, Rothenberg's painting seems to lose its sure sense of where it is headed. It becomes less and less clear just what is supposed to be going on in her canvases. The dialogue—and balance—between evocative image, abstract structure, and expressive paint-handling begins to break down. Instead of painting emblems of motion, such as horses, Rothenberg attempts Futurist-like precise depictions of motion. Her subjects include dancers, bikers, and a shadowy presence lifting a bucket of water and emptying it over himself. These are less vanguard painting than a kind of disorderly illustration. There are also static paintings featuring a duck-nosed figure meant to be Piet Mondrian, which at best read as awkward, quasi-Surrealist dreamscapes.

The problem with all these paintings may lie primarily in their large scale. The works on paper in this exhibition are smaller, and they suggest that drawing may be Rothenberg's long suit. They successfully combine the painterly depiction of energy with an energetic painterliness that eludes her on canvas. And their reduced format serves as a more credible vehicle for her ideas than the large, frequently mural-scaled canvases that have long been one of the clichés of modern painting.

Despite these failings, Rothenberg's exalted stature in today's art world is, I think, a heartening sign. It would seem to betoken a yearning for the pleasures of real painting. This is certainly a reasonable desire, but it is one that, judging from the uneven quality of the works in this retrospective, remains more elusive than many people have thought.

"Susan Rothenberg" was organized by the Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, where it was seen from November 14, 1992, through January 3, 1993. It will travel to the Saint Louis Art Museum (May 27-July 25, 1993), the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (August 20-October 24, 1993), and the Seattle Art Museum (November 17, 1993-January 9, 1994).

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A catalogue, with both an interview with the artist and an essay by Michael Auping, has been published by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery/Rizzoli (159 pages, $30; $19.95 paper).

—Eric Gibson

"Max Ernst:
Dada & the Dawn of Surrealism,"
at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
March 14—May 2, 1993

He "stands as one of the greatest innovative pioneers of this century's art." Cézanne? Matisse? Picasso? No: Max Ernst. Hyperbole has always been a stock-in-trade of Dada and Surrealism, and this deliciously preposterous claim by Walter Hopps, the Ernst specialist who helped organize this exhibition of the artist's early work, reverberates like a Dadaist prank as one picks one's way through the more than two hundred objects assembled here. Artistically, Ernst (1891-1976) was not nothing. Any larger claim would be trifling with the truth. This exhibition includes the best that the German-born artist accomplished—a handful of paintings and collages from the late Teens that sometimes manage to remind one of Paul Klee—but it also generously represents Ernst at his most tiresome and bombastic.

As is so often the case these days, this exhibition would have been much more effective, and much kinder to its subject, had it been about half or a third the size. The genius of Max Ernst simply cannot support an exhibition of two hundred objects. And yet we must be grateful for small favors: two years ago, an even larger exhibition, marking the centenary of Ernst's birth and covering the whole of the artist's long career, traveled around Europe but never came here.

Ernst was a slick draftsman and meticulous technician. He just wasn't much of an artist. As it happens, a large part of the problem was his attachment to Surrealism. Dada, Surrealism, and their many offshoots depend for their success on shocking the viewer. This is why they date so quickly. Art whose chief resource is its shock value soon comes to seem, at best, quaint. Surrealism's heavy-handed, mechanical eroticism, its formulaic distortions of perspective, its calculated impossibilities and arbitrary juxtapositions: Ho-hum. Perhaps it was all once quite thrilling; perhaps even now it sparks some residual *frisson* in adolescents who have just discovered sex and have come to realize that the world does not always behave rationally. For anyone interested in art, however, it is a pretty meager diet.

There are two reasons for this. In the first place, as the art historian Hans Sedlmayr observed long ago, most of what goes under the name of Surrealism would be better labeled Sous-Realism. Surrealism pretends to unlock the door to a magical, supra-rational world of insight *above* the happenstance of everyday life. More often, though, its phantasmagoria appear as refugees from the disintegrated world *below* everyday rational life. Surrealism represents the mind's detritus, not its generally inaccessible wisdom.

There is also the fact that Dada and Surrealism are primarily events in intellectual or cultural life, not in the life of art. The famous "anti-aesthetic" polemics of Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, et al. must be understood with this in mind. At bottom, the tradition inaugurated by Dada is a tradition of *illustration* or *propaganda*: images are created not for artistic ends but to promote various "ideas," slogans, pronunciamentos. The whole aesthetic dimension of art is highjacked, cannibalized, for the sake of an extra-aesthetic (indeed, anti-aesthetic) purpose. Hence the irony, as this exhibition reminds us, that what is artistically most satisfying about someone like Ernst is precisely what violates the strictures of the program to which he dedicated his talent. One leaves feeling that it is a pity he did not violate them more often.

"Max Ernst" will travel to the Menil Collection, Houston (May 27-August 29, 1993), and the Art Institute of Chicago (September 15-November 30, 1993). A catalogue, edited by William Camfield, has been published by MOMA/Prestel (384 pages, $75; $37.50 paper).

—Roger Kimball

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Books

The flaying of America

by James Bowman

In the culture wars, Robert Hughes, the formidable art critic for *Time* magazine, has taken upon himself the role of culture warlord: an independent force whose power grows as the principal combatants exhaust themselves fighting each other. He harries the flanks of Left and Right as they discharge their heavy ordnance at one another—and sometimes he creeps onto the battlefield after nightfall to cut the throats of the wounded. It is a rhetorically liberating position to be able to cry a plague o' both your houses, as Hughes does in his new book, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*, and he is occasionally in fine form doing it.[1] His bark is worse than his bite, but he is one of those people whose bark *is* their bite, as Randall Jarrell once wrote: and many a bite has lain awake nights wishing he were half as fearsome as his bark.

Or at least as his bark is when, more or less by chance, he manages to find something to bark about. Hughes is much better at complaining than he is at finding worthwhile objects of complaint. The style is promising, but substance is not one of his strengths. Substantively his purpose is like that of the old "peace" brigade back in the days when politics was about firepower instead of bookpower. That is to say, he tries to duck the fight by pretending to live in some ideal world where the fight would not be necessary. Thus cut loose from the need to argue responsibly, Hughes can choose targets of opportunity from among the rich variety afforded him by both sides without regard to questions of rationale, whether moral or strategic. To him, one half suspects, his victims are merely occasions to show off the capabilities of his rhetorical arsenal.

These, as I say, are not small, and few will shed any tears when it is the likes of Karen Finley being reduced to a smoking ruin. Of Miss Finley, the well-known "performance artist" who once cited as evidence of her oppression the fact that she could never become Pope, Hughes writes:

> I came to see that there is, in fact, a reason why Karen Finley should be ineligible for the Papacy. The Pope is only infallible part of the time, when he is speaking *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals. The radical performance artist, in her full status as victim, is infallible all the time. And no institution, not even one as old and cunning as the Catholic Church, could bear the grave weight of continuous infallibility in its leader. This, even more than the prospect of a chocolate-coated Irishwoman whining about oppression on the Fisherman's Throne, is why I should vote against her, if I were a member of the College of Cardinals, which I am not likely to be either.

No indeed! But he has a fine, Australian sense of the ridiculous which comes into play

1 *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*, by Robert Hughes; Oxford University Press, 210 pages, $19.95.

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especially when he is inspired by the tired Puritanism of the Left:

> In the late 80s the editor of the Presses Universitaires de France, Nicos Poulantzas, was struggling to complete an expansive series of books on Marxism and contemporary life that had been started in the 70s: Marx-and-cooking, Marx-and-sport, Marx-and-sex, Marx and anything you cared to mention. But it was unfinishable: long ago, Poulantzas had run out of Marx-fixated French writers. "Our only hope is America," he confided gloomily to a colleague, shortly before he committed suicide.

Toward the Right, however, Hughes's attitude is less lightly satirical, more serious and even bitter. If he is one of those rare liberals who have partially freed themselves from the tendency to see *pas d'ennemi à gauche*, he is not above apologizing for the silly Left's exhibition called *The West as America* at the National Museum of American Art two years ago on the grounds that "my enemy's enemy is my friend." Thus he is committed to what appears to be the new, perhaps kinder and gentler maxim of the anti-anti-progressive tendency: that there is, notwithstanding the occasional stinker on the Left, at least *pas d'ami à droite*. Thus this book, which ends with a plea against the conversion of an art-museum world of "high artistic and intellectual standards" into "an arena for battles that have to be fought—but fought in the sphere of politics," begins with a gratuitous attack on those who have been chiefly concerned with the preservation of such standards—and solely on account of their politics.

Let us notice from the start that whatever may be Robert Hughes's qualifications as an art critic, a historian, or a rhetorical paladin, his political judgments are informed by nothing but the most predictable kind of New York cocktail-party liberalism. His opinions on politics are somewhat less interesting than those of Jesse Helms on art, if you assume that at least Senator Helms knows what he likes. Hughes only knows what he doesn't like. The main thing he doesn't like is Ronald Reagan and George Bush. He flails away at them with a well picked-over selection of blunted and chipped weapons, chosen from the Left's arsenal of clichés—about "infrastructure" and "trickle-down theory" and "racially divisive" or "rigidly ideological" policies—for all the world as if he hoped to get a job as a Democratic speechwriter.

As political analysis, his book is about on the level of partisan speechifying too, for you can usually tell what fashionable guru's ideas are being tortured into Hughesian prose every time another slogan falls with a leaden thud onto the page. Even J. K. Galbraith's demonstrably false assertion that Republicans are elected because the poor don't vote finds its way into this book without any attribution to the master. But Hughes himself understands little of the substance behind his borrowed slogans, for when he grows expansive and attempts a little ad lib sloganeering of his own he comes a cropper with some such nincompoopery as accusing Reagan of having caused "the widest gap between high and middle income ever to afflict America." If he reads all his books as carelessly as he has read his Kevin Phillips (who got it wrong anyway) we had better be careful about trusting what he has to say on other subjects.

And what a lot of books he has read! Besides the political books he has so imperfectly understood but so uncritically swallowed there are many, many monuments of Western (and Eastern!) culture that Hughes is concerned to make sure his readers know he has at his fingertips. You would think that an Australian with an old-fashioned Jesuit education and enough street smarts to tell Robert Mapplethorpe to go pee up a rope when the latter asked him to write an introduction to a collection of his work—you would think that such a man would not suffer from the sort of academic insecurity that requires a parade of learning to make a few simple points. New York has got to him, I guess.

What he really wants is to hear heads all over America being slapped as culture war-

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riors say to themselves: "What were we thinking of?" and "Of course!" and "Why didn't I think of that?" and "Hughes has done it!" and "Brilliant!" Who would have thought that the solution to the whole problem of multiculturalism was so simple? Why, you just do *both*, you see: read all the canonical stuff and then read all the multicultural stuff, too. Or vice versa. All the fighting has been unnecessary, all on account of the fact that "in the literary zero-sum game of Canon talk, if you read X it means that you don't read Y." Unfortunately, it is not the *literary* zero-sum game—which has never in fact existed (what conservative opposes reading about other cultures? what liberal reading about our own?)—that has got so many people so excited but the *academic* zero-sum game. For when it comes to designing curricula, it is regrettably but precisely true that "if you read X it means that you don't read Y."

The Right's argument against multiculturalism is not that the whole wide world ought not to be so well-read as Robert Hughes but that college freshmen, who are as innocent of learning as babes and who have got to start somewhere, should start with their own culture—which is inevitably Eurocentric if only because of the language they speak. You can't do that by reading a play by Shakespeare one week and *I, Rigoberta Menchu* the next. Four years spent on the English classics alone is hardly enough to make an adequate start, given that we have virtually written off the high-school years for a generation now. Anyone who thinks that the hard work of assimilating and understanding the writings of the past is educationally equivalent to browsing the multicultural smorgasbord in order to confirm our own prejudices is dishonoring the memory of those Australian Jesuits whose wiser heads made Robert Hughes what he is today.

Yet all his learning and all his rhetorical flair are too seldom employed here to any greater end than the enthusiastic demolition of various strawpersons dressed in the traditional fascist attire—like William Bennett, whose jackboots are apparently legend on the Left. "Lay aside Plato and pick up a copy of Rigoberta Menchu, and suddenly there's William Bennett, with his big black boots on, announcing that it's closing time in the gardens of Western Civ," writes Hughes. Really? This happens just by picking it up? Well, no, that's a little exaggeration for reading it. Really? Just reading it? Well, no, that's a little exaggeration for liking it. Really? Just liking it? Well, no, that's a little exaggeration for liking it so much that you make your young people read it instead of Plato, so much that you make it into what Plato used to be—namely, one of those central texts whose ideas anyone with any claims to education must be able to traffic in.

And that's *not* closing time in the gardens of Western Civ?

If you are erecting a satirical structure, it had better be more soundly constructed than this or someone is going to come along and point out that it will only stand up with the help of a wild distortion of the other side's position at every joint. Nowhere does such distortion appear more blatantly than with respect to abortion—a subject that Hughes treats with a macabre sense of fun that might make even Planned Parenthood blush. Did you know, for example, that "the new Sacrificed Body of American conservatism"—that is, replacing the Eucharist—was the fetus? Yuck! Or that the kitschy "Whatizit" adopted as the official mascot of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta was also a fetus—the product of "fetus overload in popular culture." *Fetus overload*? What is the man talking about? The context makes clear Hughes's own enthusiasm for aborting fetuses, so it seems strange, to say the least, to lay any "overload" there may be of the pathetic little homunculi (the image is repellent in the extreme) to the charge of the anti-abortion Right.

The disconnection at times between such rhetoric and reality becomes so great that you have got to wonder where else the polished phrases might hide a shameful disregard for the truth. Hughes, for instance, is an intellectual name-dropper, which may

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account for his view that books are pretty much interchangeable. It never occurs to him that anyone but a right-wing nut could object that the exchange of Plato for Rigoberta Menchu is a pretty poor trade, or that the two must be judged on the grounds of what is actually in their books. He never considers the argument one way or the other that what you find inside a volume of Plato may be better, truer, even more interesting than what you find in the story of Rigoberta Menchu. It would probably astonish him that anyone could still think in such primitive terms. But he should at least try to make the case against such thinking, because that and not the caricature of their representation here is how the Right really does think.

Hughes begins by invoking the name of George Orwell against political language "designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." But his pleas for a more concrete, simpler language of political discourse are at odds with his own practice of keeping a high rhetorical profile without much scrupulousness about representing his opponents fairly. Orwell earned the right to be taken seriously by all political persuasions because he concentrated on the truth behind the slogans of both Left and Right. Hughes, by contrast, is a dedicated sloganeer. He even manages to make sure that Alger Hiss is exonerated in his pages, if not in the confused and contradictory statements of General Volkogonov.

Among Hughes's own outrageous distortions are charges that Reagan/Bush did not treat blacks as Americans or that Republican "morality" turned a blind eye to thievery in the Savings and Loan Associations in the 1980s. He seems to think it consistent with Orwell's injunctions about the language of politics to say that Patrick Buchanan's speech to the Republican convention last August "might not have been out of place in the Reichstag in 1932," and he overinterprets Ronald Reagan's misattribution of a quotation to Abraham Lincoln at the same convention into a contemptuous dismissal of those among "Reagan's fans" for whom "the idea that there ought to be, or even might be, some necessary relationship between utterance and source seemed impertinent to the memory of his Presidency." Huh? *Which* fans were those again?

Orwell would not have been proud of such sloppy thinking, or of the unthought processes involved in merely parroting the official line of the cultural elite, as Hughes does here, on the man who had the temerity to identify it as such. Just like Sidney Blumenthal—or Jay Leno—he affects to believe that Dan Quayle was guilty of the stupidity of not knowing the difference between fiction and reality when he criticized the television program "Murphy Brown"—even though, as a critic himself, Hughes is in a better position than most to know what real people's smug, yuppie values are encoded and sold every week in that program. Likewise, he takes up the *pro forma* denial of the cultural elite that there is any such thing as a cultural elite (Well, who are they then? Go on, Dan, name them!)—and this in a book entirely conceived as a critique of the cultural elite as well as those who oppose it!

Most of this offensive and dishonest stuff is to be found in the first two of the three lectures that make up this book, "Culture and the Broken Polity" and "Multi-Culti and Its Discontents." The third, "Moral in Itself: Art and the Therapeutic Fallacy," deserves to be taken more seriously because of its accurate identification of one of the principal reasons for the corruption of the terms of the cultural debate, namely the assumption by many on both Left and Right that art has a fundamentally therapeutic or moral function. But instead of using this insight to redefine those terms, Hughes couples it with an attack on Senator Helms and other proponents of what he insists on calling "censorship" and a plea for more government subsidy for the arts. He does not see how this line of arguing involves him in a self-contradiction.

For if it is true that "we know, in our heart of hearts, that the idea that people are morally ennobled by contact with works of art is a pious fiction," then on what grounds

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can we justify subsidizing art from the public purse? Why should ordinary working people be asked to pay their tax dollars for the non-moral, non-therapeutic, non-ennobling artistic amusements of a few of those who, for the most part, are far better able to afford them than they are? How justify even the present trifling expenditure of 68¢ per taxpayer on the arts, let alone the $25 or $30 per taxpayer that Hughes admires the French and Germans for spending, if there is no clear public benefit? But this is a question for political philosophy, and all Hughes has to work with is political slogans—such as that "there is no civilization without taxation." Even if it is true (which I doubt), what that assertion has to do with the NEA, not to mention Robert Mapplethorpe, remains far from clear.

A little of the concreteness of language that Hughes calls for in homage to George Orwell would have saved him from such an egregious over-generalization—and one implying a normative sense of the word "civilization" which is born of precisely the same belief in the moral properties of art that he elsewhere decries. It is not the only place where he falls short of the Orwellian ideal. He appears to believe that Orwell's fierce integrity and independence can be bought at no higher a price than mere willingness to attack both sides. It is not true. That willingness is held in common with those who have no intellectual principles at all. If Hughes has any, this book shows them to be consistent with a lot of rhetorical sharp practice.

Orphan asylum

John Updike
Collected Poems, 1953-1993.
Knopf, 357 pages, $27.50

reviewed by X. J. Kennedy

"Herman has taken to writing poetry," Melville's wife wrote to her mother in 1859. "You need not tell anyone, for you know how such things get around." To this day, the name of poet in America, unlike the name of novelist, has proved at times a dangerous liability. Yet John Updike has never fully accepted the security of his reputation as a writer of fiction. With *The Carpentered Hen* of 1958, he began his writing career as a light versifier. Over a span of forty years he has printed 135 poems in *The New Yorker* and scores elsewhere; he has produced four further collections of poetry and, at last, this omnium gathering.

Now, with an air of apology—the poems are "my oeuvre's beloved waifs"—Updike assembles all that he would keep. Few published waifs have been omitted; for the curious, a list of them appears at the back of the book. Updike divides his book in two: the poetry up front for the main repast, and a hundred-page creampuff of light verse.

Critics and prize-givers have never much cottoned to Updike's verse. For all its bulk and all his fame, it has virtually escaped notice in little magazines and academic quarterlies. Only one Updike poem appears regularly in anthologies: "Ex-Basketball Player," a favorite in college literature textbooks because every student knows some pathetic old high-school athlete, his glory finished, still ghosting about town. A few years ago when a new collection of Updike's poems had just appeared, I happened to find myself in the company of a prominent woman writer of the loose-verse persuasion. At mention of Updike, she flew into a rage. The very notion of his book's taking up room on Knopf's poetry list—"He's no poet at all!" I could understand Knopf's hard-nosed business sense, myself. Surely Updike's poetry must sell less feebly than most people's, at least to those investors who shrink-wrap first editions and lay them away in bank vaults for their old age.

In truth—and let me defy received opinion here—John Updike is a far better poet than the sort now growing up. A high fraction of his poems deserves reading and rereading. I confess, though, to a strong preference for the ones that rhyme and scan. They form a minority, except in the light-verse section.

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For most of his career, Updike has waxed serious in free verse, usually saving meter and rhyme for his moments of frivolity. In a review of Max Beerbohm's jingles and parodies, he once remarked that the "bulk of great English poetry, from Shakespeare to Milton, from Wordsworth to Wallace Stevens, is unrhymed" (a weak case, I think, if it has to include Shakespeare's plays). Holding rhyme to be intrinsically comic, he declared it antithetical to realism, our prevailing literary mode. As recently as 1982, in a foreword to a reissue of *The Carpentered Hen*, he again maintained that any ordering of language by means of meter and rhyme smacks of levity. Going by such beliefs, Updike could not devote his prodigious rhyming and metrical skills to reporting serious truths, as could, say, Philip Larkin. Now, however, he seems to be overcoming this hobbling assumption. In his preface he qualifies his former view: "Nor are the rhyming poems always light." Moreover, in the seventy new and previously uncollected poems, a higher proportion rhyme and scan than in his previous work.

If Updike isn't bitter enough to be our American Larkin, he has produced a few poems of comparable success: "Shillington," "The Short Days," "Vibration," "Omega," "To Ed Sissman," "Spring Song," "Enemies of a House," and more. Updike's gift for a figure of speech serves his verse well. In "Zoo Bats," the poet recalls a bat's getting into the house, and his expelling it: "I gave the bat back/ to the night like a cup of water to the sea." "Winter Ocean," a little triumph, echoes Old English poetry and coins fresh metaphors besides:

> Many-maned scud-thumper, tub
> of male whales, maker of worn wood, shrub-
> ruster, sky-mocker, rave!
> portly pusher of waves, wind-slave.

It is always risky to take poems to be as frankly self-revelatory as they seem, but in annotating them with personal memories, Updike invites us to see them as autobiography. His most ambitious poem, "Midpoint," tries to sum up his life and set it in the context of his times and (gasp!) the universe. A personal history in heterogeneous parts —terza rima; a family photo album; a celebration in Spenserian stanzas of metals, ceramics, and polymers; Poundian cantos, complete with glosses; and a meditation in heroic couplets—"Midpoint" as a whole wears a would-be major poem's look of self-consciousness. Still, this and other poems sound faithful to the poet's Pennsylvania childhood, to the glum memory of having lived wifeless for a time in a bachelor flat. Two sonnets that end the poetry section evoke the solitude that besieges a famous lecturer late at night in his motel room, and an honoree at the Academy and Institute recalling his days of struggle when young:

> The naked models, the Village gin, the wife
> whose hot tears sped the novel to its end,
> the radio that leaked distracting life
> into the symphony's cerebral blend.
> A struggle it was, and a dream: we wake
> to bright bald honors. Tell us our mistake.

However wistful, the persona that emerges from the *Collected Poems* is mentally alive, alert of eye, quick to give and to enlist sympathy.

On the minus side, Updike has a dismal fondness for the schematic poem, such as "The Dance of the Solids" (in "Midpoint") and "Seven Odes to Seven Natural Processes." Unfortunately, once the reader grasps its scheme he loses interest, though it goes on fulfilling its plan for several pages. Then too, poetry, Updike tells us, has been for him a sort of diary in which to record scenes, occasions, places visited: "the thready background of my life's fading tapestry." Such an approach to poetry can tempt a poet to mere froth and jottings. Still, poetry can be written according to any principle, no matter how shaky, provided that somehow the poet can get away with it. I do like some of Updike's landscape poems, among them "Fargo," about a city where

> parking space is no problem, and grain-fed
> health

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rewards those God's grandeur does not drive
mad.

Memorable too is "Indianapolis": a city of "plain civility" and "porch-swing sex like a window box in bloom."

Sex! For Updike the novelist, as is well known, sex is a burning theme. In the Navy I knew a fellow sailor who, had his scalp been lifted off, would have revealed nothing inside his head but a vagina opening its petals like a morning glory unfurling to the sun. At times, Updike reminds me of that man —as in his recent novel *Memories of the Ford Administration*, with its obsessed protagonist and its anatomical vocabulary. In his poetry, however, sex isn't the one thing on his mind; zestfully, he engages himself in everything. One-track-minded exceptions are the longish "Cunts," a paean that hits a few sour notes ("the lapping was an ecstasy"), "Fellatio," and the best of these, "Mouse Sex," in which a man in bed with a woman listens for her husband's return.

We enter into one another; the universe
rises about us like a hostile house.

The main meal of poetry done, Updike, before offering the after-dinner mints, steps up his apologies: "All this tricksome light verse piled up in one heap makes me a little queasy." But I was entranced. The virtuosity of the stuff is dazzling, the satire devastating. Perhaps no better collection of light verse by an individual American has appeared since Morris Bishop's *A Bowl of Bishop* (1954). Some of Updike's best shots bring down the postulations of advertisers and publicists. One direct hit is an answer to an editorial in *Life* calling for a great American novel of affirmation:

For *Life* is joy and *Time* is gay
And *Fortune* smiles on those
Good books that say, at some length, "Yea,"
And thereby spite the Noes.

And in "Publius Vergilius Maro, the Madison Avenue Hick," a response to a book-club ad that attempted to make the *Georgics* sound folksy, Updike borrows the measures of Edgar A. Guest. Many of these masterworks spring from news items. "The Newlyweds" imagines the honeymoon of Eddie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds:

"Some weddie," said Debbie.
Said Eddie, "Yeah, mebbe."

Updike's principle for sorting out light verse from poetry is to designate as light anything that derives from "the man-made world of information—books, newspapers, words, signs." A poem, on the other hand, captures an experience actually seen or felt. That principle strikes me as unworkable and Updike admits to having had trouble with it. When light verse and poetry can be told apart, their chief differences, I would say, are intensity of feeling in the poetry and a certain detached merriment in the light verse. At any rate, few will argue that most of what Updike calls light verse weighs very little at all. Some of it, pure wordplay, juggles names (Roger Bobo, M. Anantanarayanan) and abbreviations ("ZIP Code Ode"), but the best of it plays also with ideas. It should be hard for a future anthology of American light verse to omit "Youth's Progress," about a fraternity lad who at twenty-one was elected Zeus, or "In Praise of $(C_{10}H_9O_5)x$" ("My tie is made of terylene;/ Eternally I wear it"), or the self-admonitory meditation after a party, "Thoughts While Driving Home," or "Cosmic Gall," about neutrinos, particles that pass through solid bodies "Like dustmaids down a drafty hall." Perfectly realized, "Painted Wives" carries light verse beyond its limits:

All lilac and cream and pink self-esteem,
Young Madame Renoir made the sheer
daylight dream;
In boas of air, without underwear,
She smiles through the brushstrokes at
someone still there.

That is no mere trivia, I think, but Updike's most beautiful poem.

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Despite Robert Wallace's *Light Year* annuals, now defunct for lack of sales, and John Mella's brave new magazine, *Light*, unserious verse remains in the doghouse of American poetry. Only readers whose memories still resound with classical English lines will notice light verse at all: those able to enjoy a well-turned stanza, to pick up a literary allusion. These prerequisites, I'm afraid, will keep Updike's light verse off limits to most readers of *Rabbit Redux* and *The Witches of Eastwick*, and may keep it closed to most who follow *American Poetry Review*, or who print in it. At their best, both Updike's light verse and his heavier poetry are feelingful, sharply observed, and craftily made. They will therefore strike present-day champions of cool, shapeless poetry as hopelessly tender, polished, and reactionary.

Red pencils

George Steiner
Proofs and Three Parables.
Granta Books/Penguin,
114 pages, $10 paper

reviewed by Brooke Allen

George Steiner sets his new novella, *Proofs*, in 1989, during the series of revolutions that toppled Communist regimes all over Eastern Europe. In this way he gives the appearance of confronting historical material that is recent, ongoing, immediate. But in fact the greater part of *Proofs* merely retreads the same ground that Steiner has obsessively haunted for over thirty years. Western culture, humanity and barbarism, classical learning, the dead hand of spreading "Americanism," the importance accorded to art in Marxist thought, and above all the holocaust: these subjects have preoccupied Steiner continuously since he began his writing career in the late Fifties, and *Proofs*, like the trio of stories bound with it, adds little to his previous reflections.

It is a simple tale. The hero, never named (though called "Professore" by his friends), is an obscure and aging proofreader in a provincial Italian city. He is forced to accept the inevitability of two disasters: the political collapse of the Marxist ideals to which he has faithfully adhered throughout his life, and the concurrent loss of his eyesight—a loss which will mean the end of his career, a career that in its modest way has been triumphant, for he has never been known to make an error. It should be obvious from this short sketch that the hero is an uncomplicated man, one who has dedicated his life to a belief in the existence of absolute truth and untruth. The proofreader's conviction has made his potentially dull labors inspiring, for "any erratum is a final untruth," and it is not difficult for the reader to connect this idealism with the man's faith in Marxist/Leninist doctrine—a faith that did not waver even with his own ostracism from the Party after Prague. "Getting it right," the Professore says. "The holiness of it. The self-respect. *Gran Dio* . . . Utopia simply means *getting it right*! Communism means taking the errata out of history. Out of man. Reading proofs." The proofreader makes the unsurprising final choice: he will fight on quixotically, ignoring his own physical infirmities just as he has ignored the dissolution of the Italian Communist Party.

We follow the Professore as he attends his local Marxist splinter group, goes on a pilgrimage to Rome, where he meditates not in a church but at the site of the torture and murder of a group of wartime partisans by fascist thugs, watches the overthrow of the various Communist regimes on television, and participates in a philosophic dialogue with a Catholic priest, Father Carlo. Steiner's treatment of these events is predictable, even obvious. For example, one did not have to be a great thinker or philosopher to perceive the ironies underlying the euphoria that accompanied the destruction of the Berlin Wall, though Steiner apparently finds it necessary to pound the theme into the ground:

> Bursts of Beethoven deployed their great wings on the sound track, and the chorale of the Ninth rose towards the fiercely spotlit Bran-

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> denburg Gate. . . . Border guards grinned vacantly and reached for cigarettes as do the bears in a bankrupt circus. Shots of teenagers from the east tumbling into West Berlin supermarkets, rocking in wonder before the shelves, emptying them in a sleepwalker's sweep. Bright-tinted toothpaste, lacquer for toenails, soft toilet-paper in the hues of the rainbow, deodorants. . . . One of the lads mouthed his message straight into the bobbling mike: "Horror-films, man. Porno. Hot lips, man."

The central portion of the novella is taken up by the dialogue between the proofreader and the priest, and it reads like a veritable digest not only of Steiner's own volumes of written reflection but of all the century's most exhaustively debated ethical conundrums. First: the promise behind Marxism is a lie, as there is patently no such thing as an earthly kingdom of justice. But if Marxism lies by overestimating man, the lie is a noble one, while the Church ignobly holds man in contempt, and capitalism cynically estimates man only at his mean average. Second: Capitalist societies are greed-driven, with men's dreams packaged by television and advertisement ("We make love according to the television images. We masturbate to the cadence of the video cassette"); but the desire to live decently, to give one's children a comfortable home and a good education, is in fact a natural and universal one, the urge to asceticism possible only to a chosen few. Third: while Communism affirms that it is inspired by love for the common man, such "love" comprises both contempt and oppression in the doctrine's attempt to cram its own values—economic, spiritual, and cultural—down the citizens' throats.

It is one of the sadder and more wasteful characteristics of our era that the socialist and the capitalist each perceive the other's creed as naïve, and Steiner's story, while exploring both points of view, does nothing to deepen the usual level of discourse. He seems oddly perplexed to discover that neither philosophy is infallible. Indeed, perplexity has always been a hallmark of his writing, and the paradox that obsesses him more than any other is how the death-camps could exist at the very heart of Western culture, how "men could come home from their day's butchery and falsehood to weep over Rilke or play Schubert." Fifty years after the holocaust, he is still unable to reconcile the coexistence of the values of high culture with the lowest displays of cruelty and bloodlust. That these conditions can and do coexist is, however, a truism with which the postwar generation has been familiar from birth. Perhaps the problem is that Steiner, like his old Communist proofreader, is himself working with outmoded terminology. He makes free with such words as "humane," "humanist," "barbarism," and "bestiality," but in this century these terms have been used so often, and to signify such differing qualities, that they have now become virtually useless. As Steiner himself pointed out in *After Babel*, "Polysemy, the capacity of the same word to mean different things, such difference ranging from nuance to antithesis, characterizes the language of ideology." Thus when Steiner speaks of the Jeffersonian hope that education would "humanize man," he is himself guilty of foggy and naïve thinking; there can be no doubt that man is "human," however one chooses to define that word.

In *Proofs*, then, as in so much of his nonfiction (and *Proofs* is in essence nonfictional, more an editorial than a novella), Steiner appears trapped in a prewar mentality that is overly dependent upon the framework provided by formalized systems of thought—Marxism, Freudianism, classical Capitalism, all the rigid and inherently inconsistent faiths of the twentieth century. He has spent much time, over the years, in fruitlessly rehearsing these inconsistencies, assuming the peevish tone of a survivor from an older and better age; he speaks of "this cruel, late stage in western affairs" and calls our era a "post-culture." It is, of course, a display of great vanity to claim status as the end of a line, the last of a tradition, and it is also historically shortsighted. It may well be true that we have arrived at the end of the classical phase of Western culture—a long phase, to be sure,

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lasting three thousand years—but, unless it does turn out that our planet is no longer able to carry the burdens imposed by its burgeoning population, we are hardly at the end of culture itself, or even of Western culture. The culture of the future may not be to Professor Steiner's liking, but culture it will surely be.

Time & the great dead

Robert Fitzgerald
The Third Kind of Knowledge:
Memoirs and Selected Writings.
Edited by Penelope Laurans Fitzgerald.
New Directions, 279 pages, $24.95

reviewed by Cynthia Zarin

The remarkable thing about this collection of pieces by the late Robert Fitzgerald, who is best known for his enduring translations of the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, and the *Aeneid*, is not that he wrote graceful essays about translation but rather that a number of his memoirs and portraits of contemporaries place him in the first rank of writers. The memoirs propel him straightaway into the constellation that counts among its luminaries his friends William Maxwell and Peter Taylor, and the portraits of James Agee and Flannery O'Connor stand shoulder to shoulder with the elegies by Hannah Arendt collected in her book *Men in Dark Times*. His prose output, of course, was slighter than that of any of these writers, and while it is impossible to wish that Fitzgerald had taken time away from his monumental translations, it is hard not to wonder about the body of work he might have produced had his writing life taken a different turn. Readers have cause to be grateful that these pieces, which appeared over decades in magazines, journals, and as introductions, have been brought together here. As a whole, the book is interesting on two counts: first, as a vibrant record of a life of letters conducted with unfashionable self-effacement at a particular time, and with that time's attendant tastes, sights, and sounds; and, on the second count, at which stroke all that is carried away as if by a gust of wind, as an intimate description of a life filled and extended—beyond even the spiritual sense—by mystery.

Mystery announces itself immediately, in a three-page prologue, "Gifts from We Know Not Where." The piece is an excerpt from one of the last things he wrote, a commencement address to the Class of '84 at Saint John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. In it he tells two stories, both of which occurred in Greece, on two separate trips, while he was well into his translation of the *Odyssey*. In the first, Fitzgerald tells how one evening during his initial visit to Athens he found himself in the way of lonely travelers (he knew no modern Greek), standing forlornly in front of a shop window. Out of nowhere a young girl with brown braids and gray eyes appeared and greeted him in English. He asked her name and she said, "*Oh, I'm Athena*." He writes:

> Well. Of course, it turned out that she had grown up in Camden, New Jersey, and had come over to help her grandmother run the shop, and had thought me an American because of my suit, and so on—all perfectly plausible. But did not the goddess always have a good story too? I still point out to myself that that girl didn't say her *name* was Athena—she said she *was* Athena.

And as we know, the gray-eyed goddess appears in many guises in the *Odyssey*, once, even, as a little girl with braided hair.

A few years later, Fitzgerald was again in Greece, on the island of Ithaca, where centuries ago there was a cult of Odysseus. In the cove where the sleeping hero was supposedly put ashore, a group of men sat drinking soft drinks under the trees. When Fitzgerald neared, one of the old men rose and shambled toward him:

> He stopped and spoke in perfect English, in Oxonian English. It might have been the voice of Sir Maurice Bowra. He said: "You know, *we* say that he never died. *We* say that he still turns

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> up now and then, looking like a soldier or a sea captain . . . or . . . just a stranger." He paused and looked serenely at me. And there in the burning sun I shivered from head to foot. I could not say a word. I bowed my head and walked on.

Fitzgerald goes on to say that what happened must have been a coincidence; that this man should approach him in such a way, in his own language, at a time in his own life when he was deeply immersed in his translation, and was indeed years into what amounted to an identification with the hero the old man didn't bother to name. "But," he adds, "isn't that the way the gods used to appear to mortals out of the radiant Aegean air, or how the messengers of heaven appeared to men in another mythical landscape?"

That Fitzgerald manages to bring off these tales without a trace of slyness, and without readers thinking he is making overmuch of himself, is in itself a mystery. I first heard these stories years ago when I was a student of Fitzgerald's at Harvard, and then, as now, I believed their implication. It went a long way toward explaining the radiant quality of his personal presence, and a sense one had of an uncanny paradox between his utter physicality—jaunty, with his book bag and his beret, riding his bicycle—and, equally strong, his curiously evanescent quality. It seemed as if he had simply *chosen*, among many alternatives, to be there with us discussing Virgil or Langland (whom he referred to colloquially), upholding the dignity of the college while maintaining an ironic, though filial, distance from it, but that he could easily have been elsewhere—with Dante at San Gimingiano, for instance, or on the way to Canterbury. For even in literal ways, Fitzgerald was a revenant. In her lucid, moving introduction, Penelope Laurans Fitzgerald tells the story about how when Fitzgerald returned to Harvard in 1965, as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric, he reached into a desk in Seaver Hall on his very first day of teaching in order to look for a pencil and pulled out a 1932 class list for Latin I with his name on it. (And it was not lost on his students, either, that in his later years the translator of the *Odyssey* had married a woman named Penelope.)

Robert Fitzgerald was born in 1910, to parents who met while in a touring company of a morality play, *The Sign of the Cross*. He grew up in Springfield, Illinois, and his childhood was ransacked by loss. In the first of the essays in "That Starry Country," the opening, autobiographical section of the book, he writes:

> I had a very good, direct sense of what it meant to die; it meant not to be there at all anymore. My mother had died when I was three, my younger brother when I was seven, and they had been removed as by a razor. Sometimes I lay awake at night, desolate with an exact and intimate foreknowledge of my own extinction. I was no more than eight or nine when it had come home to me that the fate of the breathing person was to be hurt and then annihilated.

For most of his childhood, Fitzgerald's father lay in bed with a tubercular hip. In "Light from the Bay Windows," which by evoking tenderness without sentimentality is a singular presentation of the relationship between a boy and his father in our literature, Fitzgerald describes the offices he performed as his father lay ill:

> As long as I was a small boy—until, that is, I had grown so much that it would have been embarrassing to us both—after washing and putting on my pajamas and brushing my teeth I would get into bed beside him and lie there warm for a while, with my head on his shoulder, talking a little or sometimes silent, and I knew that in my father's mind at those times my mother, too, was present; that just as when I occupied her chair but more distinctly now he felt that my physical presence was all that remained to him of hers.

Fitzgerald's father died when the boy was seventeen. After graduating from high school in Springfield, where he had a mentor in the poet Vachel Lindsay, who had admired

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some of the young quarterback's poems in a local newspaper, Fitzgerald went on to a year at Choate, where he met the legendary classics master Dudley Fitts. It was Fitts, later his collaborator on English versions of Sophocles and Euripides, who encouraged the boy to go to Harvard; it had been his intention to go to Yale. (Under the same urging, Fitzgerald's friend James Laughlin, who became the publisher of New Directions, would forsake Princeton, to the dismay of his Pittsburgh family). From Harvard he went on to Cambridge, fixed in the idea of his vocation as a poet. There, he studied philosophy with G. E. Moore and C. D. Broad, and these years are accounted for in the final, less perfect memoirs in the first section, "The Third Kind of Knowledge" and "When the Cockroach Stood by the Mickle Wood." His attraction to philosophy had its roots in early boyhood experiences of dislocation. (When he attempted to relate these, in a paper for C. D. Broad, to Spinoza's *scienta intuitiva*, or "third kind of knowledge," Broad's only comment, months later, was "Have you had any more mystical experiences?") Here is one example of such an experience, taken from the title essay. After dropping off a girl after an evening out, Fitzgerald explains:

> . . . I stood on the front lawn for a while in the silence, in starlight, until with a sigh the mass of the universe opened for me above me, and I thought each of the innumerable leaves to be a year in time or a century or an interstellar year, dimly, silverly lit. Over the summer night of my childhood land presided the immense heaven of the past.

While student musings are easy enough to dismiss, Fitzgerald's early intimations were indicative, I think, of the central facts of his life: the certain knowledge that at any moment the world could change irrevocably, and an equally sure feeling that the world was inhabited beyond our understanding of habitation.

After Cambridge, Fitzgerald returned to the States and settled on the New York newspaper world as a place to keep body and soul together. He worked unhappily at the *Herald Tribune* as a reporter, a job for which he was unfit (he was, he recounts, "pathologically unimpressed" by the inventions of our century and couldn't have cared less about a front-page byline). He wrote poems at night. These were dark days, and the first section of the book—to which young writers might refer as to a sort of *Pilgrim's Progress*—ends with Fitzgerald kept up at night by the despairing notion that he had failed as a reporter, and that he had failed his gift.

The indirection out came in part with Fitzgerald's reunion with his Harvard classmate the ferociously gifted James Agee. The second section of the book, "Of Time and the Great Dead," is made up of Fitzgerald's portraits of writers. These include Vachel Lindsay, Ezra Pound, and Randall Jarrell, but it is the pictures of James Agee and Flannery O'Connor that remain indelible by force of Fitzgerald's palpable love and understanding of them both. His connection to Agee is easy to make out: they were young poets together, egging each other on and propping each other up, both trying (Agee more fervently) to find a berths on ships which ultimately could not accommodate them: Fitzgerald on *Time* and Agee on *Fortune*. The piece is essential reading, as is the profile of O'Connor, for anyone interested in the development of writers. Here, in a paragraph, is a snapshot of Agee as a young father, which shows him to have brought a ramshackle, tenacious ardor not only to his writing but to other aspects of his life as well:

> The father sat, all elbows and knees, in an arm chair upholstered in some ragged and ancient fabric that had grown black absorbing through the years the grime of New York. The infant in his lap mouthed with a will at the Pablum, but inevitably gobs of it splattered down even on the richly unsanitary arms of the chair, whence Jim would scoop it in long dives lest it drip—irretrievable, you could hope—on the floor.

Fitzgerald first came to know Flannery O'Connor when she rented the apartment

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over the garage of his and his second wife's house in rural Connecticut. (Their family was then expanding apace, and O'Connor was sure that the children referred to the adults among them as "he," "she," and "the other one.") He immediately took to her and to her writing—she was just then starting out and not at all well known—and later, when O'Connor became increasingly debilitated by lupus, the Fitzgeralds were among her most stalwart friends: here, I think, ramified by love, was "the breathing person," again hurt, and on the verge of annihilation. O'Connor's gift was inseparable from her spiritual outlook, which Fitzgerald shared. In this essay, comparing her with another Christian writer, the Anglo-Catholic T. S. Eliot, he writes: "In her case as in his, if anyone at first found the writing startling he could pertinently remind himself how startling it was going to be to lose his own body, that Ancient Classic." The piece concludes with a reading of O'Connor's work in general, and her story "Revelation" in particular. I venture to say that it shows, as exegesis often does, Fitzgerald's own preoccupations:

> What the struggle requires of Mrs. Turpin is courage and humility, that is clear enough. Perhaps as a reward for these, her eyes are opened. And the ascent that she sees at the end, in an astonishment like the astonishment of the new dead, takes place against that field of stars that moved beyond Taulkinham in *Wise Blood* and that hold for a small boy, in another of these stories, the lost presence of his mother.

The O'Connor profile depicts a writer working brilliantly within the logistics of the Church. Fitzgerald was a Catholic all his life, and if this book has a lack it is that nowhere is his own relationship to the Church made very clear.

The house in which Fitzgerald ultimately found himself splendidly at home was within the beams and rafters of Homer's verse, which he set about renovating for a new generation of readers. The project was from the first a marriage composed of equal parts practicality and passion. The love was for the work itself, and the first project, the translation of the *Odyssey*, kept the expanding Fitzgerald family through six years in Italy. The final section of this volume is made up of his essays on translation. Of these, "Generations of Leaves: Studies in Homer, Virgil, and Dante" is the best demonstration of Fitzgerald's gift for deciphering correspondences: a recurring simile of leaves is traced as it appears in Glaukos's answer to Diomedes in the *Iliad*, at Aeneas's approach to the river Acheron in the *Aeneid*, and in the sixth canto of the *Inferno*, when the narrator and his guide, too, near Charon's crossing. In addition to its value as exposition, the choice of subject is interesting in light of the paragraph quoted above from "That Starry Country," for surely Fitzgerald's own "innumerable leaves" must have been, for him, kin to Homer's "Very like leaves/ upon this earth are the generations of men—/ old leaves, cast on the ground by the wind, young leaves the greening forest bears when spring comes in," and to Virgil's leaves, in the *Aeneid* passage (Virgil, Fitzgerald writes, "had rethought this matter of the leaves clean through"):

> the whole crowd came streaming this way
> toward the riverside
> mothers and fathers and the husks of great
> men done with life
> along with small boys and girls, and young
> men in their prime who died
> before their parents' eyes: innumerable all
> these as leaves
> that slip away and fall through forests in the
> first cold snap of autumn.

(Those tired to death of the debate over relative value will find their spirits raised by Fitzgerald's remark about the passages under discussion: "It may be useful to assert first of all that they *are* poetry. They were poetry when they were first conceived, they are poetry now, and if you think the time may come when they are not poetry, the burden of argument rests with you.")

The final section of the book also includes

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an illuminating essay on the virtues of Laurence Binyon's translation of Dante (Pound, who took an active part, through correspondence, in the project, wrote that its "defects are like nutshells on the table after a magnificent meal"), a lively and generous reassessment of Dryden's *Aeneid*, and the postscripts appended to Fitzgerald's own *Aeneid* and *Odyssey*. My favorite line in the last of these items is the deceptively simple sentence: "The *Odyssey* is about a man who cared for his wife and wanted to rejoin her."

Agreements and correspondences. When I was a student at Harvard, Fitzgerald seemed not only on speaking terms with Virgil and Langland and Homer and Pound, but he communicated the idea that all writers were part of the same confederacy. He would run his finger down a page of student verse and, stopping midway, would point to a line and say, thrillingly, "That's what Berryman was doing when he was your age." His intent in his translation, in his teaching, and in his own poetry was to discover, by working very hard, how to make choices that would make the page sing.

As Boylston Professor, Fitzgerald taught a course in versification in which he instructed students how, among other things, to write Catullan hendecasyllabics. The example he pointed to was Auden's faultless "Up There," a poem from the series "Thanksgiving for a Habitat." Closing this book of Fitzgerald's prose, I found that the last two lines of Auden's poem ("Now a schooner on which a lonely only/ Boy sails North or approaches coral islands") had fused in my mind with the final lines of "Musée des Beaux Arts," in which a boat passes by "Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky." It occurs to me that together these lines might form a miniature portrait, seen through the wrong end of a telescope, of Fitzgerald working his way through Homer. In that lens, the schooner picks up the gifted boy who, confronted with a series of heartbreaking losses, chose, when he was grown, to tell the tale of a hero embarked on an epic, almost endless journey home.

"Style"—or whatever

Alois Riegl Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament. Translated from the German by Evelyn Kain. Annotations and introduction by David Castriota. Preface by Henri Zerner. Princeton University Press, 406 pages, $45

reviewed by J. Duncan Berry

Alois Riegl (1858-1905) was one of the premier art historians at the turn of the century and a founder of the Viennese School of art history. He and two of his colleagues, the Swiss Heinrich Wölfflin and the German Aby Warburg, forged the three main methodological avenues of twentieth-century art-historical scholarship. By and large, the research programs of Wölfflin and Warburg are already familiar to the English-reading world: beginning in the 1930s, Wölfflin's main works became available in translation and Warburg's renowned library was transplanted to London. For decades, these two great scholars, their works, and their disciples commanded wide attention.

Riegl has not been so fortunate. He has been viewed as an idiosyncratic scholar whose rarefied if encyclopedic interests and peculiar literary style were intelligible only to the most devoted students of the spicy Zeitgeist of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. For many years, the only English translation of his work was an odd snippet from his lengthy study of Dutch group portraiture. Finally, in the mid-1980s, there appeared an English version of Riegl's magnum opus, the *Late Roman Art Industry*. But the slipshod translation and inept editing were and remain an unsightly blemish upon Riegl's genuine scholarly achievement.

Now Riegl's first major book, the *Stilfragen* of 1893, is at last available in an English-language edition. But *Problems of Style*, as this edition has been titled, seems yet another missed opportunity. Its weaknesses are largely institutional in origin: that is, they

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are evident only where collective effort and attitudes are manifest. While I shall return to this matter in a moment, certain qualifications are in order. To begin with, it must be acknowledged that the translator's rendering of Riegl's German prose is outstanding. It has become an inaccurate cliché that Riegl's writing is needlessly turgid and opaque. In truth, it is only as demanding as the subject matter warrants. While Evelyn Kain's translation does not simplify Riegl's prose, it does make his brilliant analyses easily accessible to an English-reading public. I found only two occasions where Riegl's supple, sinuous style is infelicitously debased by contemporary colloquialisms.

The subject of *Stilfragen* is nothing less than the history of man's depiction of the relationship between art and nature in vegetal ornament. Beginning with paleolithic carvings, Riegl traces a continuous evolution of decorative floral representations characterized by a series of swings between naturalism and anti-naturalism. Like few art historians before or since, Riegl exhibits an uncanny ability to focus on infinitesimal details of design. And, as is the case with the finest art-historical literature, the text is full of penetrating observations that, quite simply, change the way one sees. It is true, as David Castriota demonstrates in his ample annotations, that *Stilfragen* is only of marginal archeological value today. Although several of Riegl's insights about the evolution of vegetal ornament remain valid, the corpus of samples he had available to work with was still rather limited.

But the real significance of *Stilfragen*, then and now, is its presentation of the theoretical perspective Riegl was just beginning to formulate. And it is the complete silence on this critical matter that makes the editorial handling of this volume an utter failure. Significantly, there are no annotations to the book's introduction, where Riegl first took issue with the so-called "materialist" school of art history, which consisted of the epigones of the architect, theorist, and archeologist Gottfried Semper. The "materialists" accounted for artistic evolution by arguing that style was merely the by-product of the technical processes used in the crafting of any given object. For Riegl, not only did this contradict the historical record as it continued to unfold after Semper, but it also clashed with common sense. The self-styled Semperians left no room for what Riegl dubbed "the human artistic impulse [that] has always aimed unswervingly at transcending technical limitations." Riegl held that psychology preceded technology. He had to resort to a maddeningly fuzzy neologism (*Kunstwollen*) to name this "artistic compulsion." The term itself appeared only once in *Stilfragen*, but it came to occupy center stage in subsequent studies.

The implications of this shift of emphasis were momentous. On the one hand, it could now be shown that geometric patterns were not the earliest manifestations of style—that, in fact, geometric stylization was itself evidence of artistic "progress." On the other hand, the psychological motivation of artists replaced technique as the primary generator of stylistic change. Indeed, the catalogue of artistic motivations Riegl provides in *Stilfragen* resembles nothing so much as a psychoanalytical lexicon; elaborate appeals to "impulses," "drives," "urges," "appetites," "demands," "challenges," "inclinations," "strivings," "denials," "satisfactions," and "repressions" are woven throughout his argument. While much ink has been needlessly spilled in an effort to link Riegl to the psychoanalytic movement, more perceptive analyses have revealed the latent structuralist tendencies in Riegl's work. In his later writings, recurring formal constellations—structures—came to be seen as evidence of both individual and cultural psychic states. Widespread adoption of this theoretical position announced the birth of the Viennese School of art history. Later adherents, such as Hans Sedlmayr and Guido von Kaschnitz-Weinberg, extended Riegl's method across the historical spectrum from ancient to contemporary art and architecture.

Although this is lightly touched upon by both Professor Castriota and the author of

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the preface, Henri Zerner, the *practical* consequences of this shift are wholly ignored. *Stilfragen* represents nothing less than the opening salvo from within the academy of the emerging modernist justification of formal abstraction. It has been known for over two decades that by 1900 Riegl was virtually required reading in progressive circles. The debt to Riegl declared by the German architect and industrial designer Peter Behrens alone goes a long way toward accounting for the revolution in abstract design that gradually suffused continental architecture by the 1920s. It is simply inconceivable that so much time and effort could be dedicated to bringing forth this seminal work without the slightest understanding of its extradisciplinary significance.

Although Riegl would later become more strident in his rejection of Semperian "materialism," it is nonetheless interesting to examine his pronounced debt to Semper in the *Stilfragen*. Beginning with its title, "questions" (not "problems") of style indicate a direct dialogue with Semper's magisterial *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder praktische Aesthetik* of 1860-61. And as an interrogation of "Style," Riegl pays frequent homage to his mentor. For instance, Riegl's notion of a psychic *horror vacui*—to which primitive artists were especially prone and which accounts for the seemingly compulsive need to fill in every workable decorative space—is lifted straight off the pages of Semper's *Der Stil*. The corollary of this postulate, later taken up by Riegl's compatriot, the architect Adolf Loos, was that pleasure taken in the absence of ornament was a manifestation of an advanced cultural condition. Loos's notorious essay of 1908, "Ornament and Crime," addressed this issue head on. What is more interesting, however, is that Semper also emphasized the purely volitional (as opposed to mechanical) foundation of artistic invention. The extent to which Riegl still relied upon the "classical" psychological doctrine of imagination betrays his true, proto-modernist roots. His full impact on modernist theory and design can only be appreciated when it is finally understood how the "classical" faculty of fantasy was later eclipsed by Freud's and Nietzsche's volitional psychology of instinct.

At the same time, Riegl's teleological arguments, grounded in the language of mid-century German Idealist philosophy, helped to instill an appreciation for a primitive, anonymous, collectivist ideology of form. In fact, there is a deep strain of Romanticism in Riegl that easily lent itself to evaluations of whole cultures. This hastened the emergence of a politicized, racist trend in art history whose disastrous cultural consequences anticipated the academic policies of the Third Reich. It is all too telling that today's "multiculturalists" have selected Riegl as worthy of "serious" consideration: collectivists, Left and Right, will always wind up goose-stepping to the same beat.

The socio-political consequences of the Viennese School's brand of *Strukturforschung* were attacked nearly sixty years ago by the Marxist art historian Meyer Schapiro. In my opinion, it was the "political incorrectness" detected then that accounts in large measure for the lack of interest in Riegl in the decades since. Nevertheless, starting in the 1960s, structuralists lead by Sheldon Nodelman expressed an emergent interest in Riegl.

This is why it is ironic that David Castriota, an assistant professor of art history at Sarah Lawrence, sees this volume as "a *Stilfragen* for the 1990s and beyond." Politics aside, Riegl's staggering command of the visual evidence and rhetorical subtlety indicate why Professor Castriota's crabbed rejoinders typify the appalling condition of the humanities: "Nowadays, one is prone to be a good deal more circumspect in attempting to understand or explain the root causes of major stylistic trends and developments." While there is a grain of truth here, it is submerged in an ocean of exculpatory renouncements of the Big Questions. Today it is Riegl's thesis of continuity that is deemed "politically incorrect." Professor Castriota naïvely condescends to Riegl's masterfully synthetic enterprise, pronouncing as if from above that

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> ours is . . . a period in which historians, critics, and epistemologists have come to question the basic assumptions behind the whole notion of cultural continuity and evolution. In place of continuity, relation, and order, it has now become preferable to seek discontinuity, difference, and fragmentation.

In short, today's "scholars" take pride in deliberately skewing research. A clearer example of the sheer idiocy of politically correct "theory" as it relates to the history of art would be difficult to come by. To those of us still willing to state the obvious, Professor Castriota looks like a recent arrival to the sack of Rome explaining why the demolition of the Forum represented a salutary advance in architectural sensibilities.

Compounding the editorial irony is the fact that, by 1893, Riegl had not yet achieved the "exalted" perspective of cultural relativism that won him warm praise from later collectivists of the academic Left. *Stilfragen* is absolutely rife with judgments of value and quality! One suspects that it was the desire to resurrect Riegl-as-relativist that inspired this effort. Further examination of his work made it clear that some hasty back-pedaling was needed.

Haste is the key word. The contrast of genuine scholarship with what goes by that name today is painfully evident throughout. From the intrusive, pedantic annotations to the abundant typographical errors, this edition represents the "lite" version of intellectual achievement. Work on this edition began in 1985, and one would think that seven years would be sufficient to eliminate skipped lines and misspellings. The laziness of thought that characterizes the whole enterprise is nowhere more evident than in the book's preface. Here Henri Zerner, a professor of fine arts at Harvard, presents the theoretical capstone of Riegl's method. "In this work," he writes, "Riegl's concept of *Kunstwollen* (which can variously be translated as 'artistic intention,' 'intentionality,' 'will,' or whatever) was just taking shape." "Whatever," indeed.

Seasons of belief

Christa Wolf
What Remains & Other Stories.
Translated from the German by
Heike Schwarzbauer & Rick Takvorian.
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295 pages, $25

The Author's Dimension:
Selected Essays. Translated from
the German by Jan van Heurck.
Edited by Alexander Stephan.
Introduction by Grace Paley.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
336 pages, $27.50

reviewed by Tess Lewis

The law of chaos is the law of ideas,
Of improvisations and seasons of belief.
—Wallace Stevens

Long considered one of Germany's most important contemporary writers, the novelist and critic Christa Wolf has been showered with literary prizes on both sides of the Wall. The Marxist utopianism, moral agonizing, intense self-scrutiny, and warnings of ecological apocalypse in her fiction gradually earned her an international cult-like following. Yet Wolf, a resident of what used to be called East Germany, did not become a dissertation and academic conference goldmine until the publication of her novel *Cassandra* (1983), a feminist reworking of the fall of Troy from the prophetess's point of view. Because Wolf neither wavered in her belief in Communism nor openly questioned the legitimacy of one-party rule, the SED, Germany's Communist party, tolerated her work's oblique criticism and her departure from an early adherence to the doctrine of Socialist Realism. However, the forces of history have now caught up with the political basis of Wolf's work, dividing a once loyal following between those who believe her idealism a moral force that empowered the oppressed (whether by the SED, industrialized society, rigid bureaucracy, capitalism, or

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the patriarchy) and those who believe it a dangerous sentimentality that diverted attention from the moral and financial bankruptcy of the East German political system.

Wolf's image sustained a devastating blow in June 1990, seven months after the demise of the Berlin Wall, when she published "What Remains," a novella she had written eleven years earlier. Indeed, the work precipitated a virtual street brawl among East and West German writers, intellectuals, and journalists across the political spectrum. Like much of Wolf's fiction, "What Remains" is highly autobiographical and describes a day in the life of a prominent writer under government surveillance. This story was written at a time in which Wolf and hundreds of other writers and artists were being punished for signing a petition protesting the 1976 expulsion of Wolf Biermann, an immensely popular satirist and folksinger. A devoted Communist, Biermann had been vociferously critical of the Stalinism and ossified bureaucracy of the Russian and East German regimes. Wolf, the most famous of the signatories, did not suffer as much harassment as many others, some of whom were silenced, forced to leave the country, or, like her husband, expelled from the Party.

While recognizing in "What Remains" that the repression she suffers is relatively mild, the narrator describes the devastating effects of censorship and surveillance on personal relationships, language, and even one's sense of identity.

> I myself. Who was that? Which part of the multiple being, from which "myself" was composed? The one that wanted to know itself? The one that wanted to protect itself? Or that third one, that was still tempted to dance to the same tune as the young gentlemen there outside my door?

The narrator finds hope in the creation of a new language capable of expressing her fear, distress, and hopelessness. "[A] privileged life like mine," she consoles herself, "could be justified only by attempting to go beyond the borders of the sayable, knowing full well that border violations of any kind are punished." Writing, it seems, will enable her to escape that compromising third self. Nonetheless, the narrator's self-confidence is further eroded in an encounter with writers of a younger, more assertive generation who find her advice against endangering themselves by publishing their work irrelevant.

"What Remains" was published as daily revelations about Stasi crimes and the extent of their information network—files were kept on six million citizens in a population of sixteen million—stunned even the most jaded East Germans. As a result, Wolf's personal and private lives were subjected to intense and often uncharitable scrutiny and her entire *oeuvre* to a full re-evaluation in light of these revelations and subsequent events. (More recent revelations concerning Wolf's brief, peripheral involvement with the state security system, which I address below, will surely increase the stringency with which her place in the German literary pantheon is reassessed.)

The charges against Wolf ranged from insensitivity to those whose lives had been ruined by the regime, to accusations of cynically attempting to fashion herself as a dissident once the danger had passed. The intensely subjective focus of her later work and her vague, "multivalent" language, once praised for its subtlety and ability to fox the censors, were condemned as insufficiently critical of the regime, if not officially sanctioned by it. Many who had seen Wolf as a spokeswoman either for the oppressed or for their own utopian longings turned violently against her when it appeared she was not the bold, subversive moral force they had thought.

The Wolf debate quickly expanded to include the role of intellectuals in postwar and especially reunited Germany, Germany's relationship to its past, the moral responsibility of the writer, and the relation of literature and politics—issues that have dominated postwar German fiction in the novels of Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll, Uwe Johnson, Martin Walser, Siegfried Lenz, and their peers.

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The literary merit of "What Remains," divorced from its political and historical context, scarcely played a role in the debate. This is hardly surprising, as Wolf has consistently argued for the linking of aesthetic and political agendas. Indeed, her highly subjective, moralizing fiction and the heavy metaphysical and political burdens she would have literature bear, elevate the catch-phrase "the personal is political" to dizzying heights. "What Remains" is, in fact, one of Wolf's weakest works of fiction. Her trademark self-scrutiny is interspersed with a liberal dose of domestic trivia and banal dialogue, which presumably are meant to take on added significance when observed and overheard by the young men in the car outside her window.

"What Remains" is finally available to American readers in *What Remains and Other Stories*, a collection of eight stories written in the 1960s and 1970s. A companion volume of sorts, *The Author's Dimension*, presents a selection of Wolf's essays on reading, writing, and politics from the 1960s to February 1990. While these collections provide a broad overview of Wolf's literary and political concerns over the past three decades, little of the writing collected here seems likely to survive its historical moment or the Christa Wolf phenomenon. Except in Grace Paley's introduction to the essays, where Wolf is misleadingly defended as a scapegoat blamed "for all GDR corruption, bureaucratic crime, and political repression," no echoes of the Wolf debate have been allowed in either book. In fact, Christa Wolf's continued refusal to address the issue led her to accept a nine-month position as visiting scholar at the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities on condition that she be shielded from the press.

Wolf did break this self-imposed silence briefly in late January 1993 to admit that she had been an "inoffizieller Mitarbeiter" or "informal collaborator" with the Stasi from 1959 to 1962. Wolf's announcement was ostensibly made as a gesture of support for the East German dissident playwright Heiner Müller, who had come under attack for his own involvement with the state security system. It was, however, simply a matter of time before Wolf's seventy-page dossier would be made public. There is no evidence in the file that Wolf spoke against her comrades. In fact, she frustrated her debriefing agents by preferring to discuss ideological aspects of literary theory over the personal lives of her friends and acquaintances. Recognizing that Wolf's reticence and the "intellectual anxiety" she evidenced when questioned made her an unfit informer, the Stasi closed her file after three years. And it must be remembered that Wolf's file is dwarfed by the forty-two-volume record of the Stasi's surveillance of her family from 1968 on.

What is most surprising is not the file itself but Wolf's claim to have forgotten the whole affair until she was granted permission to read her dossier in May 1992. Surely the publication of "What Remains," and particularly such passages as the one describing the third self *still* "tempted to dance to the same tune" as its surveillors, would have jogged Wolf's memory of first-hand experience with Stasi agents. Furthermore, her continued refusal to enter into the debate occasioned by "What Remains" or this latest "Stasi debate" flies in the face of her belief in the writer as moral authority and guide.

Of course, Wolf has not been kindly treated by the German press. A few dissenting voices began to reassess her literary reputation and role as moral authority as early as 1987. Yet general sympathy for Wolf only began to wear thin in the fall of 1989, when she urged her fellow citizens to resist the mammon of Western materialism in order to stay and realize the socialist ideal on East German soil. She also spoke out against reunification, and, like other East German intellectuals who doggedly clung to the hope of reforming the existing socialist state, revealed how out of touch she was with the prevailing political climate. Several of these appeals appear in *The Author's Dimension*. While they recall the breathless pace of the political upheavals three years ago, they now seem, at best, beside the point. Yet a number

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of her statements here are worse than irrelevant. For example, in "Challenge to Dialogue," an interview broadcast in West Germany on October 8, 1989, Christa Wolf praises the unprecedented amount of talk between her fellow citizens and government officials and challenges them to continue this dialogue, but not at the expense of caution.

> Many party members are very troubled and want to try to preserve the GDR, just as everyone else does. But it can't hinge on giving in to those who suddenly are dragging the formula of German Reunification out of mothballs. I consider that dangerous nonsense. It's hypocritical, too, because those who are now talking about reunification do not themselves believe that it is possible and necessary or even good. But they cling to this trump card, and I know that the East German reform groups . . . plan to oppose this formula by creating a GDR which cannot be swallowed like a light snack.

Such out-of-hand dismissals of differing opinions do offer quite a challenge to dialogue.

Wolf's appeal to preserve the culture that developed independently of West Germany's over the past four decades is valid. However, her January 1990 declaration that the "rapid annexation of the GDR by the FRG" was an "Anschluss," just when the true extent of the GDR's economic failure, of the nation's widespread pollution, and the SED's abuses of power were finally becoming known, reveals a willful blindness that smacks of perversity.

The remaining essays in *The Author's Dimension*, which date from 1964 to 1988, will do little to heal Wolf's bruised image. Tired accusations against the corrupt West and Wolf's constant trumpeting of the socialist alternative obscure her more thoughtful passages. Wolf's description of the effects of a childhood under the Nazi regime is exceptionally insightful. She observes in herself and many of her generation an "inclination to fit in and submit to others, the habit of functioning, the faith in authority, the craving to agree with others, and especially the fear of contradiction and rebellion, of conflict with the majority, and of exclusion

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from the group," and speaks eloquently of her struggle to overcome these tendencies. Wolf again is at her best in "Illness and Love Deprivation: Questions for Psychosomatic Medicine," a sensitive and shrewd analysis of the misogyny that continues, albeit with somewhat less virulence than before, to infect the field of gynecology. Why then does she suspend critical thought when facing the realities of the East German socialist experiment and her own faith in or need to submit to the SED authorities? How can one explain her absolution of all women, "by their very nature," from responsibility in the three-thousand-year development of a self-destructive civilization? (After all, she argues, "not one woman has participated in the research for our age's weapons, in developing their technology, in planning their deployment, in the power to command them.")

It is the height of presumption for critics, particularly those whose lives have never been endangered by a political system, to pass judgment on the behavior of citizens living under totalitarianism. When *What Remains and Other Stories* is read as a whole, however, there is a disturbing irony in the collection.

The first story, "Exchanging Glances," is a reworking of a section from Wolf's autobiographical novel, *Patterns of Childhood* (1976). This story is a succinct meditation on knowledge, responsibility to one's fellow man, and guilt. The narrator, fleeing Russian troops, encounters a Communist survivor of a Nazi concentration camp. The survivor's question, "Where, then, have you lived all these years?", forces the narrator to abandon her naïve belief in fascist ideology and face the extent of Nazism's horror. This question became a motto for Wolf, a rallying cry to Germans to confront their past and, by extension, to resist the oppressive powers of contemporary, industrialized society. In practice, though, for Wolf this meant denouncing American capitalism and the late bourgeois society of Western Europe.

The stories that follow mirror the evolution of Wolf's thinking: her increased emphasis on the validity of subjective experience as a means of defying the anonymity of the Machine Age, on the empowerment that reading and the exercise of the imagination can bring, and on the defense of women and the environment against the destructive powers of male rationality. Two stories from the 1960s, "Tuesday, September 27" and "June Afternoon," grew out of Wolf's first tentative steps away from the dictates of Socialist Realism. This doctrine, with its demand for positive, exemplary heroes and its explicit championing of the classless, revolutionary, socialist society, dominates her first two novels, the untranslated and largely ignored *Moscow Novella* (1961) and *Divided Heaven* (1963). In these stories Wolf turns inward, looking to subjective experience rather than political dogma as a means of understanding the world around her. Unnamed writers speak in both stories, describing the daily minutiae and larger concerns of their lives. By portraying the complex undercurrents in the mundane lives of regular citizens who agonize over their usefulness to society but are not afraid to dream, the narrators, as writers, can "enlarge the lives of people condemned to take small steps."

Wolf is on surer footing in the later, satirical story "A Little Outing to H." In this heavy-handed send-up of doctrinaire fiction, the narrator dreams he or she is taken by a friend to Hero Town, a community of positive heroes from postwar literature. Trapped in their plots and at the mercy of censors, these heroes are ludicrously one-dimensional and unable to serve as a model for any reader.

In "Unter den Linden," Wolf addresses the complexities of the unconscious through the narrator's dream of a stroll down the famous boulevard in Berlin. Wolf uses a surrealistic dreamscape to illustrate the inevitable alienation from oneself and one's fellow citizens in modern society and to criticize obliquely authoritarian systems of power, dishonest relationships between men and women, and, of course, consumerism.

Wolf returns to the destructive effects of society on the sensitive, feeling individual in "The New Life and Opinions of a Tomcat"

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and "Self-experiment," but this time with an emphasis on the evils of male rationality and exclusive reliance on the notion of objective, verifiable truth. In the first story, a tomcat belonging to a professor of applied psychology relates his master's development of a "System of Maximum Health of Body and Soul" in order to achieve "Total Human Happiness." To bring about such happiness, however, humans must be stripped of mercy, daring, altruism, imagination, faithfulness to one's convictions, and other "secondary characteristics." In "Self-experiment," a female scientist agrees to test a drug that will immediately transform her into a man. She quickly realizes that she is suppressing her "feminine" characteristics—imagination, feelings, creativity, her nurturing instincts, subjectivity—for the sake of ambition, certainty, and power. She decides to end the experiment prematurely and regain her femininity when she realizes that the director of the scientific institute, with whom she had been in love, is a man incapable of love.

After the explicit, compelling warning against unquestioning acquiescence to authority and societal pressures with which Wolf begins this collection and the heartfelt, if at times overwrought, social critique in her subsequent stories, the resignation of the final story is an unexpected compromise. The narrator's hope in "What Remains," that in ten or twenty years she will be able to express her feelings accurately and her self-justification in terms of productivity, seems anything but the courageous self-scrutiny and honest appraisal for which Wolf has made exalted claims over the past four decades. By focusing on the internalization of censorship into an "inner censor" and the possible informants among her friends and acquaintances, the narrator avoids confronting her adherence to the ideology that legitimizes the censoring authorities. But worst of all is the narrator's facile, sentimental conclusion: "What remains? . . . That there is no misfortune other than that of not being alive. And, in the end, no desperation other than that of not having lived." The fear of execution and torture surely inspire a very specific sense of despair.

The question of selective blindness and insight into ruling ideologies is crucial to the re-evaluation of Wolf's *oeuvre*. Wolf's courage and success in challenging the taboo that had been imposed on the legacy of fascism in her country should not be underestimated. She has written movingly of her struggle to accept and, knowing "the whole truth," even to love her people again. Yet it is perhaps this very struggle that has caused her repeatedly to defend her country with such misleading naïveté. In a 1983 conversation with Grace Paley in New York, for example, she declared: "Maybe we can't say all the things that you can say here, but on the other hand, people listen to us much more. Not only the readers, but the politicians as well." Wolf's first-hand knowledge of Germany's Nazi past, of the widespread seduction of her countrymen by Nazism's "perverted ideology," no doubt has lain at the heart of her need to believe in man's ultimate perfectibility and, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, in her country's former progress toward realizing the socialist ideal.

After 1989, it is impossible to read honestly any of Christa Wolf's writing without acknowledging the dismal reality behind her utopian vision—an Eastern European regime second only to Ceausescu's in the invasiveness of its totalitarian terrorism. Reading Wolf, one longs for the refreshing cynicism of Louis MacNeice's "Better authentic mammon than a bogus god."

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Letters

Maritain at Princeton

To the Editors:

It is good that the correspondence between the Maritains and the Tates has been published, and I am delighted by George Sim Johnston's perceptive review (February 1993). I must, however, point out a serious misperception of fact expressed by a quotation from Caroline Gordon (Tate). In support of her accusation that Jacques Maritain was "shamefully treated by Princeton University" she wrote: "He delivered the lectures which were finally published as *Creative Intuition* to a bunch of housewives."

Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry (New York, 1953) is the definitive version of the A. W. Mellon Lectures that Maritain delivered at the National Gallery of Art. In his acknowledgments, the author says: "I am greatly indebted to Mr. Francis Fergusson, who, as director of the seminars of literary criticism at Princeton University, gave me the opportunity for an indispensable preparatory phase of research." Those seminars, which continue today as the Christian Gauss Seminars in Criticism, enabled prominent men of letters and other thinkers to present work in progress to a small invited audience of critics, scholars, philosophers, and creative artists. While there may have been some housewives among the few women present (very few, in accordance with the make-up of the University at that time), it was hardly in that capacity that they had received invitations.

Of the seminars I can speak from personal experience, since I was fortunate enough to be able to attend. I can give no first-hand information on Gordon's other charge—that the head of Maritain's department "urged him 'not to give the boys so much Plato and Aristotle but more Bertrand Russell and Whitehead.'" But I am reliably informed, by a professor emeritus of the Philosophy Department at Princeton, that Maritain was invited there specifically to teach Scholastic philosophy; and that whoever may have been the source of the alleged remark, it was certainly not the chairman, Robert Scoon. Scoon, himself a scholar of Plato, could not abide the likes of Russell. Moreover, he once actually refused to offer a position in his department to a very prominent philosopher precisely *because* the candidate refused to teach Plato.

Edward T. Cone
Princeton, N.J.

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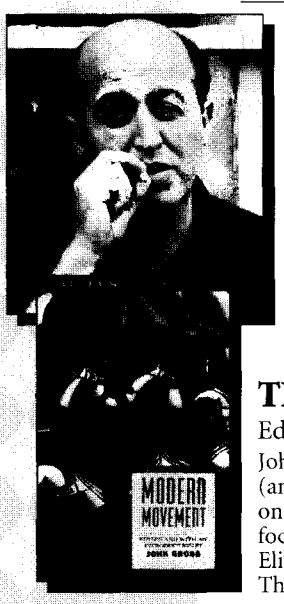

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